



Acropolis now: Ponte City as 'portrait of a city'

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Abstract

Ponte City is a project by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse that uses photographs, architectural diagrams, text, interviews, fiction, found objects, oral history, and archival material to critically explore a particular urban landscape in Johannesburg. The exhibition and book, which comprise this project, manifest in different ways, but both work together to cut across disciplines and incorporate the languages of fine art, photography, architecture, urban planning, history, economics, popular culture, and literature. The publication comprises a book of photographs and pamphlets in which the artists have collaborated with former and current residents, gathered personal stories, delved into the archive, invited authors to contribute essays on a variety of topics, and worked with material found at the site. This article examines the notion of a 'portrait of a city' in relation to the *Ponte City* project, and asks the questions: What is a portrait of a city? Is it possible to take a 'portrait of a city', and what techniques are used when a photographer portrays places and people, or attempts to take, or make, a 'portrait' – of a city, a place or even a building such as Ponte? Can a building come to stand in for a city? And how have these strategies been put into play by Subotzky and Waterhouse in the *Ponte City* project?

Keywords

photography, Ponte City, portrait, South Africa, Subotzky, Waterhouse

Ponte City

The Ponte tower in Berea, a suburb on the edge of Hillbrow close to the inner city of Johannesburg, at 54 storeys high is the tallest residential block in Africa.¹ Completed in 1976, Ponte was built in the spirit of utopic apartheid modernism, a 'city of the future'

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(for a critique of modernist architecture and its practitioners in apartheid South Africa, see Murray, 2007). It was a mass housing project designed to accommodate young, upwardly mobile ‘white’ residents. In June 1976, the confidence of the white minority was severely shaken by the student uprisings in Soweto.² The modernist dream was doomed at its start with Ponte failing to achieve the popularity that the original developers had hoped for.

In the 1980s, Hillbrow became a ‘grey area’³ as black residents moved into Ponte in spite of the Group Areas Act. As apartheid began to collapse, the big businesses that had previously been located in the CBD took flight to the northern suburbs. Hillbrow, once the trendy heart of Johannesburg, gained a reputation for criminal activity, gangs, prostitution, and drugs. Ponte sank into infamy and decay.

Today, Ponte has been ‘cleaned up’ and houses largely ‘black’ South Africans and immigrants from the rest of Africa. It is a curious and unique building, with a sordid history and a complex present. It has become one of Johannesburg’s iconic buildings and has featured prominently in the imaginings, research, and visual representations of Johannesburg. Scenes from feature films such as Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) and *Chappie* (2015) were shot in and around Ponte, and the tower is an ever-present backdrop in films about the underbelly of Johannesburg, such as *Tsotsi* (2005) and *Jerusalem* (2008). Philip Bloom’s *Ponte Tower* (2012) and Ingrid Martens *Africa Shafted* (2011) are recent documentary films about the building and those who live there. Novels such as Norman Ohler’s *Stadt des Goldes* [City of Gold] (2003) have been set in Ponte. Artist Stephen Hobbs made a video piece, *54 Stories* (1993), in which he threw a video camera attached to a make-shift parachute into the cylindrical core of the building and engineered the camera to film its descent into Ponte’s heart of darkness.⁴ The piece falls within a trajectory of art work produced since the 1990s that has focused on Johannesburg. For Hobbs, Johannesburg’s post-apartheid evolution provided fresh opportunities for art making. For the first time in about 30 years, Hobbs (2014) writes, ‘[a]n intense period . . . emerged in the 1990s, when the radically transforming African city that Johannesburg was becoming represented a critical context within which to witness and unpack new identities for art and for the city on a global scale’. The 20-second looped experimental video that emerged encompasses the flight, or rather the symbolic fall, of a video camera from the top of the building to its final end, when it crashes onto the ground; the camera is destroyed in the process. The clip references the Ponte building’s 54 floors as well as its multiple stories, and explores its associations with suicide, falling, and destruction (Hobbs cited in Weinek, 1999).

Representing Hillbrow

Much social research on Hillbrow and Ponte has not attended to the visual arts, although there have been exceptions. Working from an urban studies perspective, Alan Morris’s *Bleakness and Light: Inner-City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (1999) describes the changes in this urban area from a ‘whites only’ suburb to a racially and culturally diverse neighbourhood. Arguing against the negativity about Hillbrow that proliferated in the 1990s, Morris notes that many of his respondents believed Hillbrow offered them a better quality of life. Tanya Winkler (2013: 309) argues that ‘despite severe physical

decay . . . Hillbrow remains a resilient port of entry to Johannesburg for many residents who desire to engage in local and transnational economies'. She emphasizes the transient and migrant quality of Hillbrow, which is seen as somewhere to land, but not necessarily somewhere to live. Fabian Frenzel (2014) investigates inner city 'slum tourism' in Johannesburg using the example of Ponte City and the initiatives of Dlala Nje, a non-government organization working with children that is based at Ponte City.

This article is less concerned with urban studies and sociological perspectives and is primarily interested in interrogating how Ponte has been represented by visual artists. My concern lies in examining the notion of the 'portrait of a city' with reference to the *Ponte City* book and exhibition project by British artist Patrick Waterhouse and South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky. I am interested in examining how this ambitious art work contributes to the 'discourse' of the city of Johannesburg in particular, and to the imaginings of the postcolonial city in general.

In my work as a fine art photographer I have focused on urban structures and spaces. Having been one of Subotzky's teachers at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, I acknowledge a level of entanglement with the artist and his work. I have thought intensely about charges of voyeurism, which have been levelled at Subotzky's prison project *Die Vier Hoekes* [Four Corners] (2004). In *Ponte City*, questions have arisen in my mind in relation to Subotzky's contested position as a white photographer, and Waterhouse's situation as a British artist, and what this might have meant in the photographic encounter. This line of questioning arises from my awareness of a rich existing body of fine art production that has provided insight into the visual representation of the city within a changing South African context. Through this research, I seek to contribute to building a more nuanced and complex 'portrait' of the South African city than is generally available in popular media.⁵ It should be noted that my mode of exploration lies within the parameters of fine art, and is aimed at problematizing issues of representation rather than finding absolute solutions. In this sense, this article contributes to an ongoing debate about the [im]possibilities of representation,⁶ and the adequacy or limits of the photographic medium to provide insights into perception, interpretation, and the visual imaging of the city.

Book and exhibition

While Subotzky and Waterhouse are constructing an art work around a building rather than a city, Ponte was conceptualized as a modern 'city within a city' by its designers. Following this line of reasoning, this article reflects on the ways in which artists represent the building itself, as well as how the Ponte tower is deployed to stand in for, or to say something more about, the city of greater Johannesburg beyond its immediate perimeter. At the end of a six-year investigation (2007–12) into this behemoth of buildings, Subotzky and Waterhouse compiled their *Ponte City* project, deploying photographs, architectural diagrams, text, interviews, fiction, found material, oral history, and archival material to critically explore a particular urban landscape. Both exhibition and book work together to cut across disciplines and incorporate the languages of fine art, photography, architecture, urban planning, history, economics, popular culture, and literature. The resulting series of exhibitions⁷ and lavish publication showcase the collaborative art and curatorial skills of its authors.

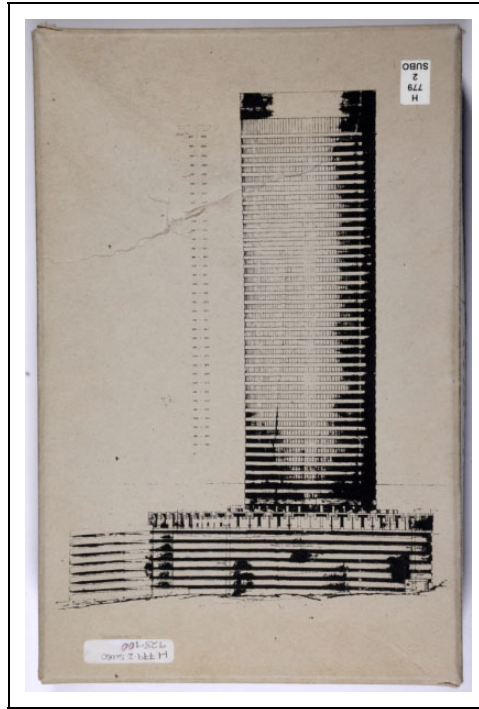


Figure 1. Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City*. Image showing the box. Photograph: Svea Josephy.

As shown in Figures 1 through 5, the publication is presented in a large, neutral grey cardboard box, reminiscent of an archival storage box. It comprises a book of photographs and 17 pamphlets. On the outside of the box, the text and an architectural drawing have been screen-printed in black. Inside the box is the ‘traditional’ photo book. This has a black cover, is not paginated, is without captions, and has only one short, introductory text. It is a visual narration of the building. The photo book contains images of the building and environment, a series of portraits of individuals taken in lifts, cityscapes of Ponte and surrounding areas, ‘documentary’ photographs of ordinary activities, families raising children, parties, bathing, all working together to show something of the character and identity of Ponte.

In the pamphlets, the artists have collaborated with former and current residents, gathered personal stories, delved into state and private archives, invited authors to contribute essays on a variety of topics (both non-fiction and fiction), and worked with material found at the site. It shows not only the photographs made by the artists but also attempts to incorporate an archive,⁸ which exposes further layers of the building’s present and history. The project explores the lived realities and fictions of the building. The archive assembled by Subotzky and Waterhouse reveals the positive mythology of the building: through the eyes of its architects and planners, and promotional material released at the building’s completion and at the time of the 2008 ‘revamp’. The negative myths are also shown, through images and text dealing with suicide, crime, gangs, drug lords, prostitution, poverty, and urban decay.



Figure 2. Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City*. The box showing pamphlets housed under the photobook. Photograph: Svea Josephy.



Figure 3. Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City*. The box with camera alongside, showing resonances between the camera with telephoto lens and the building. Photograph: Svea Josephy.



Figure 4. Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City*. The photobook in its box. Photograph: Svea Josephy.

Portrait of a city

The ‘portrait of a city’ concept is drawn from my initial thoughts in relation to Subotzky and Waterhouse’s work, later written into a paper presented to the Johannesburg City Portrait conference at the Università Iuav di Venezia in Venice in June 2015. My notion of the ‘portrait’ has its origins in this initial formulation, rather than in Waterhouse and Subotzky’s conceptualization of their work in the Ponte City project.

While Subotzky and Waterhouse do not refer to their project as a ‘portrait’, critics such as Alexander Strecker (2014) and Annabel Sheen (2015) describe the project in this way. *Ponte City* could be read also as a biography of a building, and in this representation there is an element of anthropomorphism. When framed as a ‘portrait’, the building becomes almost human, develops a life story, features and a personality.⁹ While some of this is a useful strategy in relation to a photographic framing of a place, there are levels on which this notion is difficult. The use of the term ‘portrait’ to describe a city is potentially useful, but it has its pitfalls. I explore the success or failure of this device though out the course of this article in relation to *Ponte City*.

Subotzky and Waterhouse commissioned the writer Ivan Vladislavić to edit the book component of the project. In Vladislavić’s extensive interest in Johannesburg in his semi-fictional writing, he plays with the ‘portrait’ as a central metaphor for his stories in which words do the work of portrayal and portaiture (in particular see Vladislavić, 2006,



Figure 5. Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City*. A view inside the photobook, showing a pamphlet completing the photograph. Photograph: Svea Josephy.

where the word ‘portrait’ features in the title, and also 2001 and 2004). It is as if the way the portrait describes the relationship between the story and the city in Vladislavić’s work can somehow be translated into a way of thinking about the art project in relation to the actual building. And as I argue in this article, much like Vladislavić’s writing, the portrait that emerges is fragmented, refracted, and unstable (Ngara, 2011). As Goodman (2009) noted, *Portrait with Keys* accentuates the unpredictability of the city as a subject. Vladislavić presents ‘a guide to a Johannesburg that is not a guide at all’ since the ‘rambling’ and ‘fragmented’ quality of the story imply that Vladislavić is proposing but ‘one of many possible cartographies of that city’ (Goodman, 2009: 225).

My interest in the project dates to the first showing of the *Ponte City* exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town (2010) in which I was drawn to the continuities and shifts that I observed taking place in the photographic work of Subotzky. As one of my students at Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the early 2000s, I had followed his photographic career with interest. Subotzky had consistently worked with the idea of ‘place’ in his photography – Pollsmoor Prison, Beaufort West, Ponte City – and while the Ponte City series signalled an obvious continuity with his earlier work, it also presented new possibilities because of the collaboration with Waterhouse, and the additional dimensions of the art book and display of archival material alongside the large-scale photographic artworks. It could be argued that the voyeurism that was considered problematic in Subotzky’s earlier work (see Alberts, 2005) continues into Ponte, where issues around race and voyeurism continue to prompt debate.

In art criticism and in the literatures on photography, the idea of a ‘portrait of a city’ or ‘portrait of a place’ circulates extensively as a popular way of framing images. It is

somewhat clichéd, and is used loosely without a clear sense of what is meant by the phrase. Many photographers have been positioned by writers, editors, and critics of photography to have contributed to a ‘portrait’ of various cities. Jean-Claude Gautrand’s (2011) *Portrait of Paris* contains images of Paris by prominent photographers including Louis Daguerre, Eugène Aget, Brassai, André Kertész, Robert Doisneau and Henri Cartier-Bresson. *New York: Portrait of a City* (2010), edited by Reuel Golden, constructs the idea of a city portrait featuring images by Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White, among others. These popular anthologies of photographs positioned as city portraits take a slightly different approach to my interest, which lies in elaborating what I consider to be a sustained exploration that attempts to show the many facets and the individual ‘personality’ of a place. Unlike the superficial coffee table book, collections such as Eugene W. Smith’s on Pittsburgh, or David Goldblatt’s on Boksburg, are illustrative of the notion of a sustained exploration of a place.

The American photojournalist Eugene Smith obsessively documented Pittsburgh in the 1950s and intended his titanic, multilayered essay depicting the complex city as a portrait. According to Ellen Wilson (2001), Smith’s most famous photographs ‘tend to be portraits of individuals, but in this project, the city itself is the individual. That was Smith’s intention’. Many documentary photographers have produced sustained bodies of work recording towns and cities, which could by these criteria be considered city portraits. In my opinion, projects such as Smith’s aim to go beyond the surface, to capture something unique about the city represented.

In *Cities and Photography* (2013: 234) Jane Tormey outlines the notion of a ‘portrait of a city’ when discussing the work of Valérie Jouve who, in Tormey’s formulation, presents Paris as ‘a montage of fragments, juxtaposing individual portraits besides images of apartment blocks’. Tormey continues: ‘It is a portrait of a city represented by different moods, gestures and faces of a series of “characters”, who project different imaginary possibilities for experiencing the city.’

Subotzky and Waterhouse’s *Ponte City* builds on bodies of work and art historical precedents in South African photography which closely investigate a place, and, one might argue, construct a ‘portrait of a place’. While few photographers have specifically structured these projects as ‘portraits’, the notion of a portrait of a place is a useful framing device for a project that delves below the surface of a town or city. The most influential work of this sort in South Africa has been David Goldblatt’s *In Boksburg* (1982), which investigated a small East Rand town during the height of apartheid. The collection scrutinizes the people, work, recreation, homes, and landscapes of this town in the context of a particular time and ideology. In many ways, the notion of the portrait of a place was inherited from international precedents such as Smith’s, but it has had a particular take up in South Africa, in which Goldblatt’s book is significant.

Other South African photographers have made books and exhibitions about places. These include *District Six Revisited* by George Hallett (2007), Peter Hugo’s *Messina/Musina* (2007),¹⁰ Marc Shoul’s *Brakpan* (2012), Paul Samuels’ *XVI X Edenvale* (2012), Ashley Walters’ *Uitsig* (2013), and an earlier project by Mikhael Subotzky, *Beaufort West* (2008). There have been several iterations of ‘portraits’ of Soweto, including *Soweto* by Peter Magubane (2001), *Soweto* (2010) by Jodi Bieber and *Soweto* (2010) by

Jürgen Schadeberg. Recently, students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) School of Arts completed the Roodepoort Photography Project (2014),¹¹ which focused on that West Rand town. The ‘portrait of a place’ takes many forms in South African photography but is most often ‘documentary’ in focus and intention.

In the past two decades, a proliferation of fine art exhibitions and art works have chosen the city of Johannesburg as subject. A leading example is William Kentridge’s *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989).¹² This hand-drawn animated film is ‘set in the over-exploited, scorched industrial and mining landscape around Johannesburg, which represents the legacy of a time of abuse and injustice’ (South African History Online, 2011). The reasons for the sustained engagement of artists with the city of Johannesburg are discussed in an essay written for the catalogue of an exhibition called *Jozi and the (M)other City*, where I argue that ‘artists relentlessly engage with “the city” Johannesburg, precisely because it is less pretty [with] its smoky stacks, mine dumps, bleak and banal suburbs, Babylonian towers, tightly stretched fiery skies and diverse, conflicted population’ (Josephy, 2008: 16). In photography, the dominance of Johannesburg as subject or backdrop is marked.

A distinction must be made in relation to photographic essays that are situated in Johannesburg but are not primarily *about* the city of Johannesburg. Some of this work presents stories about the people who live or work in Johannesburg, and it has a different emphasis, as in the work of Ernest Cole in *House of Bondage* (1968), Eli Weinberg’s *Portrait of a People* (1981), of photographers from *Drum* magazine such as Jürgen Schadeberg and Bob Gosani, and more recently Sabelo Mlangeni’s *Invisible Women* (2007) and Oupa Nkosi’s *Black Diamonds* (2010). In these collections, the city of Johannesburg, its identity and personality, recede or advance depending on the narrative, and remain the backdrop for other concerns.

In contrast, the city of Johannesburg is the central ‘character’ and the main theme or thread that runs through the work in publications or exhibitions by photographers such as Jo Ractliffe (2000–4), Andrew Tshabangu (2004), Guy Tillim (2005, 2014), David Goldblatt (2010), Dean Hutton (2012), Mack Magagane (2012), Terry Kurgan (2013) and Mark Lewis’s continuing series *Wake Up, This is Joburg* (in Zack, 2014). I suggest that these projects be considered ‘city portraits’ of Johannesburg. In this vein, Tillim (2014) specifically references the notion of the city portrait in his photography projects on Johannesburg, noting that, after four months of research in 2004, his plan was ‘to photograph small pieces [of downtown Johannesburg] at a time and put them together to create a portrait’.

A portrait is a recording of a likeness, and an attempt to capture something of the presence, personality, and expressions of a person through visual representation. In art history, painted portraits were made in ancient Egypt and possibly earlier. But portraits have always been regarded as more than merely a record. As Murray (2015) notes, they ‘have been used to show the power, importance, virtue, beauty, wealth, taste, learning or other qualities of the sitter’. Prior to the invention of photography, portraits were painted or drawn (possibly sculpted), which meant that this was something only the noble and wealthy classes could afford. The advent of photography from the mid-19th century democratized portraiture to some extent, and a new mode of self-representation was for the first time available and accessible to the middle classes and to those aspiring to it.

Photography has inherited many of the conventions of portraiture, producing images that are static, posed, flattering and, most often, single images. Such representations offer a summing up of the person and are an attempt to reveal something unique and beyond the immediately obvious.

A 'portrait of a place' operates differently. Like the portrait of the person, it is an attempt to see beyond the surface, but it requires the space to be opened up. In the same way that an identity photograph is not a portrait, so a landscape of a city is not a portrait. In a city portrait the city is undone: we see the city from the inside; the unusual, the unique, the surprising, the unseen, the very guts of the city must be revealed. Unlike the conventional portrait, the portrait of a place consists of multiple images, finding form in the photo book, where the many iterations and incantations of a place can be adequately explored.

Ponte projections

The title of this article is adapted from *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola's epic Vietnam War film loosely based on Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. In its turn, Ponte has been represented across various media as a post-apocalyptic space. Its location alongside Yeoville ridge brings nuance to this idea.¹³ Positioned above the city, Ponte functions as a modern-day acropolis, a citadel built on high ground above the city; but also as a symbol of the post-apartheid post-apocalypse. Moreover, as the name Ponte City implies, this is a city within a city, an apartment building paying homage to the Corbusian notion of the *unite d'habitation*, the self-contained structure within the city.¹⁴ With time, Ponte has become emblematic of Johannesburg, a building that 'is recognized as the essence of Johannesburgness by immigrants from Kinshasa to Addis Ababa' (De Mervelec and Chipkin, 2013: 152). In this formulation, it is a portrait not simply of a building but also of a city.

What we see in other 'portraits' of a place is a wider framing. While Subotzky and Waterhouse's Ponte is a portrait of a building, and contains an intense concentration on specific place, it also speaks to a more expansive portrait of Johannesburg as seen through the narrow focus of the cylindrical magnifying lens of Ponte.¹⁵ The 'best and worst of Johannesburg has constantly been projected on to this building', Subotzky notes. 'It's like a roller-coaster of myth' revealing 'a metaphorical history of Johannesburg and South Africa' (Subotzky cited in Matthews, 2014). The binary of 'best and worst' projected onto Ponte tends to miss the complexity and nuance of lived realities of its residents who live between these two extremities.

In this view, Ponte becomes a microcosm for the macrocosm of the city of Johannesburg: the chaos, the violence, the abjection, the hopes, the affection, the vibrancy, the euphoria, the prospectors, the opportunities, the ambition, the corruption, the despair, and the disappointment. In some ways, this building reflects on the world beyond Johannesburg and stands in for contemporary urban Africa. Through the archive harnessed by Subotzky and Waterhouse, the building holds the many stories of the African metropolis, including accounts of movement from rural to urban, and narratives of migrations across the continent. Subotzky and Waterhouse critically investigate not only the structure of Ponte, looking at its history in terms of urban planning and its form as an

architectural structure, but also scrutinize its political past and present. Ponte is used to tease out some of the lived realities of the city: its economies, desires for wealth, education and security and the tensions between South Africans and immigrants from the rest of Africa and its attendant xenophobia.¹⁶

By some measures, *Ponte City* convincingly tells the story of Johannesburg, of standing in for the macrocosm. It succeeds, more often than not, through the found material, the painful letters of longing and dreams destroyed, the family photographs abandoned in flats, rather than through the photographs and taxonomies (discussed further below) which seem to flatten out differences, individuality, and unique narratives of the many Africans who have lived here. In doing so, there are times when the project appears to reduce the city and the portrait to a two-dimensional form. Subotzky and Waterhouse struggle to step out of their powerful authorial role, and because of this, their portrait at times appears ambivalent and less convincing.

Architecturally, Ponte is monumental and functions as a monument where it comes to stand in for the city. The building is sculptural: its bold cylindrical shape stands out against the rectilinear buildings of Johannesburg, as do the seductive ramps of its parking garages and the Brutalist concrete surfaces. Ponte is both real and mythological. What has characterized both Ponte and Johannesburg in the media representations after the collapse of apartheid is a sense of a city moving towards apocalypse, anarchy, and destruction. Subotzky and Waterhouse show some of this, but they also show a story of improvement, renewal, and creativity, when they highlight how the city of Johannesburg is being used in ways that run counter to the original planning intentions.

Subotzky (cited in Matthews, 2014) has identified Ponte as 'Jo'burg's biggest cliché'. But rather than attempting the task of the journalist, Subotzky sees himself as constructing a portrait that captures 'the mythology around the building, and the lives of the people living there' (cited in Blaine, 2015): 'Everybody's got a Ponte story, and a lot are very exaggerated. It's the crucible of Johannesburg's stories about itself. I am documenting the mythology, not the actual story.'

In their *Ponte City* project, Subotzky and Waterhouse seem to work with and against the building's mythology. On one level, the project reinforces the building's mythology by showing traces of violence, stories of suicide, the abject state of the building. On another, they attempt to show their sitters with dignity, living ordinary lives. They weave the archive of the building through the photographs and thus (re)present it, showing a nuanced view that goes some way to undo the cliché that the building has become.

Urban legend has it that at one stage the first five storeys of the building's central core were filled with rubbish and rubble thrown down by residents and builders. *Cleaning the Core, Ponte City, Johannesburg* (2008) confirms this fable. Subotzky and Waterhouse show a post-apocalyptic scene of the trash being removed. The image, although shot in colour, is made almost monochromatic by the darkness, rubble, and dust. The only deviation from this palette are the men in brightly-coloured hardhats and bibs. Above them, the hollow core of Ponte's inside stretches up towards dirty, broken windows, and a crisscrossing stairwell. A shaft of light illuminates the workers from an oculus above. The light filters feebly, as a group of about 20 men stand on a mountain of trash, clearing it. The men are dwarfed by the enormity of the structure and the magnitude of the undertaking. There is something about the scale relationship of the building, the

darkness, and the way the light streams in from the windows above, that suggests a cathedral, and the photograph is resonant of a religious painting. As in religious and mythological representations, the task that confronts the men is overwhelming, impossible even.

Exposing the city

Subotzky and Waterhouse implement several artistic ploys to make their 'portrait', including a conversation between the collected archive presented in the 17 pamphlets, a dialogue between the archive and the contextualized lived 'reality' presented in the photographs of daily life and portraits, a play between inside and outside, and an opening up of the space through nearly obsessive typologies. As mentioned, the book is presented in a large box which opens to reveal the photo book. There is an air of mystery as the book does not reveal itself immediately. Under the photo book one discovers the pamphlets. One must dig deeper into the box to retrieve the pamphlets which are laid in archaeological layers, one on top of the other. Subotzky (cited in Matthews, 2014) explains the rationale for including the pamphlets, which are based on photographs and documentation left behind by evicted tenants that the artists encountered while picking through the detritus of emptied apartments: 'We realized that these things could tell a whole history that we couldn't with our photographs – of all the people who had been there, in a kind of psycho-geographical sense.' Like archaeologists, they started 'trying to piece the narrative together from fragmented documents'.

The archive is structured in such a way that it interrupts the photo book. There are blank places in the photo book in which the pamphlet or archive is to be inserted and read. In inserting the pamphlet into the blank space the picture is completed. Subotzky (cited in Matthews, 2014) explains that this is 'a way of floating different layers of narrative on top of each other'. According to Benton (2014), the 'reader becomes a participant in the acts of matching, collaging, and layering which are at the essence of the project'. The pamphlets comprise newspaper clippings, an article on the geology into which Ponte's foundations extend, a discussion on the materiality of Ponte, a history of the Berea and Hillbrow neighbourhoods in relation to urban planning, stories of the key characters, found materials, a piece of fiction in which Italo Calvino visits Ponte, found photographs, discarded magazines, letters, architectural plans, and promotional material from the revamp of the building that was never completed.

The fragmentation and disorder found within the building confirm some of the stereotypes about Ponte. But in the book, there is an intense contrast between the dingy inside and the staggeringly beautiful views of the city taken from the apartment windows. While composed of individual images framed by the windows, the combined effect is an expanded panorama, which functions both horizontally and vertically. To show more in their 'portrait', the artists have opened up the building's cylindrical space and flattened it out, exposing the inside and the view of the outside from the inside. This has been done using typologies in which the artists photographed every door, every view, and every TV screen in almost every flat. When presented together during the exhibition as slides on a light box, the sheer mass of the 12 by 54 rows, one above the other, is overwhelming. The images in each typology are arranged to replicate the building, 'floor

above floor and flat by flat', the artists explain, 'lives lived stacked together and on top of each other [revealing] layers of history as well as individual fragments of interest' (Subotzky cited in Reznik, 2013).

A similar approach is adopted in the Ponte book, but here one begins with a single TV, view or door and expands out or in over the following pages until one can barely find the original TV. This focusing out or in replicates the action of a photographer's lens, and not only opens up the building, but also plays with the relationship between the micro and the macro, and the sense of Ponte as a microcosm of Johannesburg. The 'exploded view' of Ponte offered by Subotzky and Waterhouse functions initially as a collection of impressions, which begin to crystalize into an impression of the inhabitants of Ponte.

This being said, it could be argued that this way of replicating the building through geometric shapes has become something of a trope, if one thinks of calendars and posters of the 'doors of Ireland'¹⁷ for example. It is hard to know what the typologies can say about the people and the architectures they inhabit, save that each flat has a door, and the obvious point that the building has many doors. We are given an impression, rather than any real sense of the people and their struggles.

There is a play between the magnified panoramic view of the city, which suggests control and surveillance, and the eye-level view that reveals the chaos, clutter, multiplicity, and difference (Clarke, 1997: 76). Clarke discusses the way that the city has been represented in the history of photography, and his description sums up the approach adopted by Subotzky and Waterhouse:

The camera negotiates between two poles, the vertical and the horizontal; the extremes of visual unity and disunity which suggest part of a larger dialectic as to how the city has been seen: the public and the private, the detail and the general, the exterior and the interior, the historical and the modern, the permanent and the temporary. (1997: 76)

However, there is also a sense in which Subotzky and Waterhouse's obsessive typologies make for an all-observing panoptic gaze, and this functions more like a mugshot than a portrait; it is indexical rather than honorific. The architecture follows a Bentham-like design with its central core and passages that allow for every door to be penetrated, and Big Brother to know what is happening inside each apartment. In its study of confined spaces, the project suggests a return to Subotzky's early work such as *Die Vier Hoeke* (2004), in which he explored the confined spaces in South Africa's prisons. Claustrophobia, abject conditions, and dystopia are resonant in both projects. In *Die Vier Hoeke*, Subotzky was interested in the role of surveillance and the camera in prisons and was influenced Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1991). Fascinatingly, it was once proposed that Ponte become a high-rise prison. In 1998 the American architect Paul Silver was invited to South Africa at the invitation of the Ministry of Correctional Services. He looked at several sites and of Ponte he said: 'I... realized it was absolutely perfect. It's a lousy apartment building, but a perfect prison' (O'Loughlin, 1998). It would seem the Ponte project carries the mark of Subotzky's prison photography, suggesting that if this is a portrait – of a building and by extension a city – it is one under surveillance.

Whose portrait?

In his famous novel on beauty and decadence, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde (1976: 6) comments on the relationship between the writer and his work:

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself.

In this essay, I have discussed various projects and modes of photographing the city, keeping a narrow focus on the notion of the ‘city portrait’ rather than exploring who was photographing the city and for what purpose. Wilde tells us that the act of making a portrait always reveals more about the artist than it does about the subject. There are very real questions to be asked about the complexities and politics of photographing in South Africa. In this decolonial moment, in this contested space, it is important to think through the complexities of race and class, which are very much present in this project.

It is important to acknowledge Subotzky’s contested position as a white photographer and Waterhouse’s situation as a British artist, both outsiders to Ponte and Johannesburg, and what this might have meant in the photographic and archive encounter. In her seminal essay on the question of photographic disinterestedness and objectivity, the performance artist and critic Martha Rosler (1992: 306) reminds us that documentary photography ‘as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful’. Rosler’s point has a bearing on how to think through the process of viewing the Ponte project, by all accounts a seductive, sumptuous and expensively packaged product aimed at a particular class of consumers, and well beyond the reach of many of those whose portraits are featured in the book. Subotzky and Waterhouse make a point of including people and residents in their Ponte portrait, and in doing this they imply that humans cannot be separated from buildings; similarly, it would seem to confirm that the photographer cannot be separated from the image he or she makes. The question remains as to whether or not the artists have avoided voyeurism in their careful curation of a decaying, post-apocalyptic apartment block where people eke out a precarious existence and inadvertently become the focus of an aesthetic object. In its attention to the detail of narrative, archive and photography, has the Subotzky/Waterhouse Ponte project avoided attracting criticism for being yet another example of ‘ruin porn’?

On balance, and notwithstanding the salient pitfalls elucidated above, *Ponte City* makes a contribution towards presenting a microcosm of urbanism after apartheid. In addition to illustrating something of how the city has changed in post-apartheid South Africa, it amplifies how photography as a method and practice has evolved in the ensuing decades, particularly when compared with a project such as *In Boksburg* (Goldblatt, 1982). In terms of the book and the photographic display, there is a sense of an ‘opening up’ of the traditional conventions of South African documentary photography, showing some of the ‘new documentary forms’¹⁸ adopted in recent years. *Ponte City* reveals substantially more than the conventional photo essay, and Subotzky and Waterhouse uncover layers of biography, history, and personality of a place in

their 'portrait'. Their use of the archive, other voices, and the imaging of the lives of ordinary people works towards creating a complex and nuanced portrait. On the other hand, the typologies and the emphasis on decay rehearse and reproduce the anesthetization of poverty and 'ruin porn' tropes that have become familiar in South African photography, as well as globally.

The project *Ponte City* has opened up a series of critical moments for consideration in the contemporary city of Johannesburg. These form the conceptual underpinning for the creative works produced. From the detached and abstracted architectural diagrams, to the contextualizing eye of the photographer, the slippage between the imaginaries of the city by planning and architectural professionals, and the words and dreams of its residents, Subotzky and Waterhouse have created a set of indicators which conceptually draw attention to the cutting contrasts in the way in which Johannesburg has been imagined and lived.

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Notes

1. The building was designed by Mannie Feldman and Rodney Grosskopff.
2. Soweto is, in a continuation of apartheid parlance, referred to as a 'township'. It is located southwest of Johannesburg and was established by the apartheid regime as a dormitory residential area to accommodate the black workforce. The student uprisings of 1976 began in this area.
3. A 'grey area' during the apartheid era was one in which people of different races and ethnicities lived and/or socialized in defiance of the provisions of the various iterations of the Group Areas acts promulgated by the Nationalist Government after 1948.
4. Hobbs (2014) describes the process leading up to the final construction of his falling video camera: 'I had started collecting 8 mm and 16 mm Bolex cameras and I thought it would be great to load one of them with film and toss it over the edge into the core. I was looking forward to salvaging a completely destroyed camera with printable film inside. . . . I eventually found a lightweight 8 mm Canon Camera, 300 feet of film and a solution to a makeshift parachute – a wire coat hanger, plastic shopping bag and gaffer tape.' For more on Stephen Hobbs' interventions in Ponte and Johannesburg see: <http://www.stephenhobbs.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/art-sa-feature-winter-2010.pdf> (accessed 18 August 2016).
5. For example, see: Johannesburg's Ponte City (<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/11/johannesburgs-ponte-city-the-tallest-and-grandest-urban-slum-in-the-world-a-history-of-cities-in-50-buildings-day-33>); The South African building that came to symbolize the Apocalypse (<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/the-south-african-building-that-came-to-symbolize-the-apocalypse/517056/>); Ponte Tower, Johannesburg's

- 'shanty town in the sky' (<http://www.news.com.au/finance/business/other-industries/ponte-tower-johannesburgs-shanty-town-in-the-sky-now-has-a-waiting-list-to-move-in/news-story/e4d0625c644819af7624c119b5dfc78a>); Inside Johannesburg's infamous Ponte City Tower (<http://www.archdaily.com/493877/inside-johannesburg-s-infamous-ponte-city-tower>).
6. These debates hinge on unpacking the myths surrounding the genre of documentary photography, and the deconstruction of the notion of 'truthful' visual representation.
 7. *Ponte City* was exhibited in various forms, initially in Two Projects (Goodman Gallery, 2009) in Johannesburg, and later as Ponte City (Goodman Gallery, 2010) in Cape Town. Excerpts from the series have been shown at the Liverpool (2012) and Lubumbashi (2013) biennales, as well as the South African National Gallery (Cape Town, 2010). The exhibition was also shown at Installation, Le Bal, Paris (2014), FotoMuseum Antwerpen (2014), and at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh (2015). Excerpts from the exhibition were shown at the Photographers Gallery, London (2015), where the work won the 2015 Deutsche Borse Photography Prize.
 8. An archive is a collection of documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. As such, the material gathered by Subotzky and Waterhouse, both on site at Ponte and off site in state archives, libraries, and through commissioned works, has formed a new archive, including documents and records which provide information about a place and a group of people. However, as is argued in a large body of contemporary scholarship, archives should no longer be regarded as neutral repositories of documents, nor as passive institutions in which material from the past is stored; rather, they are sites where power (of social memory and the past) is negotiated and contested. According to Swartz and Cook (2002: 1), 'archives are established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. Through archives, the past is controlled. Certain stories are privileged and others marginalized'. Seminal critiques on the archive include Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), Anne Laura Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain* (2009), and the South African volume *Refiguring the Archive* (Hamilton et al, 2002). These remind us that archives such as the one constructed by Subotzky and Waterhouse are not innocent repositories of documents.
 9. Ivan Vladislavić, the editor of Subotzky and Waterhouse's book, has composed literary portraits of the city in *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and, significantly for this research, *The Exploded View* (2004), a text about the construction of space in post-apartheid South Africa, and *Portrait with Keys* (2006). He has collaborated with David Goldblatt on *Double Negative* (2010), which comprises a novel and photographs.
 10. Pieter Hugo's *Messina/Musina* (2007), explores a small border town, and combines portraits and landscapes. The project conjures much of the anxiety at living in a town on the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa at a particular moment in South African history preceding xenophobic attacks of 2008. Asked to define his project in relation to Goldblatt's *In Boksburg* as the precedent-setting photographic exploration of small town South Africa, Hugo (cited in Hugo, 2007) notes that Goldblatt's *In Boksburg* takes a 'clear political stance'. 'That book was shot in black and white at a time when we were living in an apartheid state. Now we're in a completely different era, a different place. The complexities have become far more nuanced. There is no longer an obvious aggressor or oppressor.'
 11. This project was made in collaboration with the Public Affairs and Research Institute (PARI), curated by Rory Bester and Jo Racliffe.
 12. The concerns developed in this film are continued in *Monument* (1990), *Mine* (1991), *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991), *Felix in Exile* (1994) and *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).

13. See Lindsay Bremner's fascinating essay 'Ponte as geological agent' in Subotzky and Waterhouse, *Ponte City* (2014).
14. The initial plan included a commercial component featuring financial and property services, an art gallery, book and clothing stores, food and liquor markets, restaurants, a laundry, and more. The complex was to have its own floodlit tennis court and a swimming pool, in keeping with the modernist ideal that aspired to provide for all the day-to-day needs of its residents who would live, work and play in one place.
15. Subotzky's 2015 contribution to 'All the World's Futures' at the Venice biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor, uses microscopes built by the artist to analyse the physical make-up of images of violence.
16. Ponte City's interest in the stories of immigrants from Africa resonates with Terry Kurgan's *Hotel Yeoville* (2012) project. There are differences in approach, however, in that in Ponte City, the artists' gaze frames and represents, in contrast to Kurgan's project where the inhabitants themselves participated in making and contributing representations and photographs of their own.
17. See, for example: Emerald Isle Gifts (<http://www.emerald-isle-gifts.com/irish-posters-collection/irish-posters-16-x-12-traditional-doors-of-ireland-irish-poster.asp>); Irish Culture and Customs (<http://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/ALandmks/DoorsofDublin.html>); Doors of Ireland (<https://www.dreamstime.com/royalty-free-stock-images-doors-ireland-image26618189>).
18. The term 'new documentary forms' is taken from the title of an exhibition held at the Tate Modern Gallery, London, in 2012. The exhibition tracks some of the shifts in the genre by artists who, in the curators' view, 'have used the camera to explore, extend and question the power of photography as a documentary medium' (Baker and Mavlian, 2012).

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