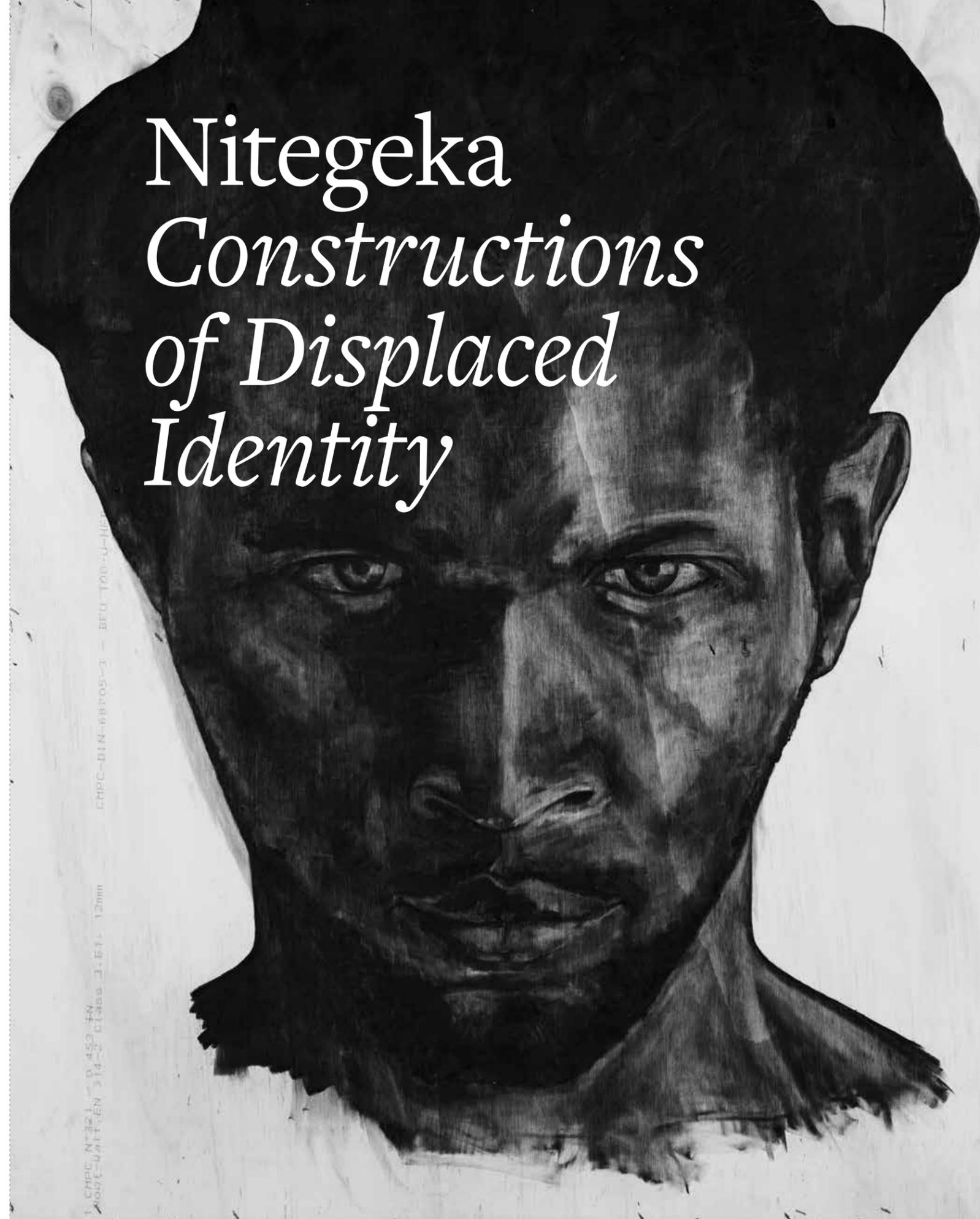


Nitegeka
*Constructions
of Displaced
Identity*



I. CHPE NITEGEKA - B. 459 - HN
MOBILITE EN 214-2000 - CLASSE 3.51 - 12mm
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The Promises of Pink Modernisms

Jonathan Cane

PN2 & 3

In São Paulo, the timber hoarding that encloses construction sites is always tinted pink. This watery pink stained hoarding appears to be a peculiar Brazilian flourish, which I have yet to see anywhere else. Young Brazilian artist Adriano Costa used this pink timber as a part of the construction of a temporary dwelling in the gallery Casa do Povo for the 2014 exhibition *Postcodes*. Costa's construction of pink timber, draped fabric and tropical pot plants was a homage to the work of Brazilian modernist Hélio Oiticica, especially his iconic installation *Tropicália, Penetrables PN2 'Purity is a Myth' and PN3 'Imagetical'* (1966/7). First installed at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro for the group show *New Brazilian Objectivity*, Oiticica's large installation included two improvisatory wooden-framed structures – PN2 and PN3 – which were clad in brightly painted wood and hung with tarpaulin. With customary linguistic inventiveness, the artist called these constructions '*Penetráveis*' (Penetrables) suggesting an opening into the work, or through the work, which has been influential for much subsequent installation art. The Penetrables, resembling the scale and materiality of informal settlements in Brazil, marked

a dramatic reworking of the ‘pure’ modernity of Mondrian and Malevich that Oiticica had been pursuing in his earlier career. In light of what he perceived as lived experience, Oiticica rejected a high-modernist colour palette and strict geometric forms, reworking standardised, modular materials that one might find in a *favela*. His rejection of purity as myth was part of the broader intellectual and aesthetic project of Lusotropicalism in Brazil at the time, which aimed, among other things, to naturalise foreign aesthetic influences, to swallow them like a cannibal, as it was put by Oswald de Andrade in the ‘Cannibal Manifesto’.¹ The resultant exuberance, referred to as ‘regional’ or ‘tropical modernism’ or, indeed, simply as ‘Tropicália’ (Oiticica’s neologism), has often wrongly been associated exclusively with an essentialised Brazilianness and has also, at the same time, obscured the specific political context of the military dictatorship in Brazil. The pattern, in the Global South, of refashioning modernism in the context of more or less predacious states and states of underdevelopment is suggestive of alternative – perhaps even speculative – genealogies of modernism.

Contemplating the forms Southern modernisms have taken, continue to take and might well take one day, offers an appealing mode of encounter with Serge Alain Nitegeka. This essay is especially interested in the utopian impulse of modernism and the degree to which Nitegeka holds onto that kind of hope, critically and also affectionately. It may well be true that modernism is what Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’, a condition in which the very promise of happiness is also the obstruction to its own fulfilment and to flourishing.² There is, nevertheless, something delicious about modernism, something pleasurable; a joy in rolling it around your mouth, against what the Brazilians call the ‘sky of the mouth’, masticating, relishing and swallowing. It is perhaps, in spite of everything, that the moral and philosophical impulse of modernism toward hope is so seductive. In Nitegeka’s work the door is both the promise of entry – or indeed escape – and the obstacle to movement; the cargo crate is both promise and obstacle to safe transportation, or movement at all; the interior is both the promise and impossibility of home and permanence.



Adapt-Mode I, 2013, installation, Stevenson, Cape Town



Fragile Cargo X, 2013, paint on wood, 185 × 98,5 × 68,5cm

What this essay aims for then, is a parallel or pink reading of Nitegeka, rather than a didactic analysis of his work. It hopes to suggest alternative positions for his work within a scattered archive of the Global South, which has offered different and similar ways to swallow and digest modernism. The essay offers what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called a ‘reparative’ rather than ‘paranoid reading’,³ a mode of affectionate resistance to Nitegeka’s work which is itself a tender, sympathetic and yet resistant treatment of modernism.

KPD-HC1N

The paulistano-pink construction cladding of Brazilian modernism has its analogue in Silvia Gutierrez’s living and dining room, recreated in human scale for *Monolith Controversies*, Chile’s pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014.⁴ Curated by Pedro Alonso and Hugo Palmarola, the exhibition centered on a single panel of prefabricated concrete produced in 1972 in Quilpué, northwest of Santiago de Chile. The panel displayed in Venice was fabricated in a newly built Soviet factory, which produced countless like it – called the HC1N model – and remarkably, was actually signed in the wet concrete by then president Salvador Allende. Less than one year later Allende was murdered, replaced by the dictator Augusto Pinochet, and this socialist KPD factory was taken over by the Navy. Soviet executives and technicians were expelled from Chile and the HC1N signed by Allende was, bizarrely, transformed into a Catholic altarpiece with representations of the Virgin and Child, and then eventually forgotten in the factory yard. The rediscovered panel, the curators argued, represents ‘a relatively marginal tradition in the historiographies of modern architecture’ which is remarkable considering that globally there are 170 million concrete panel apartments. Gutierrez’s apartment is one such dwelling. Her replica apartment shows a lovingly decorated pink interior of 514 objects – pot plants, lace doilies, tchotchkes, dolls, still lives, family photos, fruit, flowers, artworks, vintage furniture, ceramic elephants – everything that high modernists reject. And yet it is not clear that her non-modern interior is a rejection of modernism. How can we think through her investment, attention to, and love of this

modernist space? And can we do it in the same terms with which we might treat the curators' affection, however ambivalent, for the HC1N panel which was transported to Venice to be displayed as evidence? Is it correct to interpret Gutierrez's vernacular sensibility as a domestication or softening of the concrete, a feminisation of soviet style brutalism? What the curators claim, is that her homely interior offers the exhibition viewers a contrast to the industrial framework of the mass-produced social housing; and perhaps it does. It is striking, however, just how human scaled the HC1N panel is, too. True, it is terribly heavy, unhumanly heavy, but it encodes a dense humanism, optimism and affection for the proportion and possibility of human flourishing.

The proportion of obstacles to human flourishing seems to be what is at stake in Nitegeka's iterative formal studies. The form of the door, the wall, furniture and the roof are variously manufactured and improvised from standardised construction materials. Fired Earth® Extreme Roof black paint and 6mm plywood board suggest on one the hand, a kind of neutral materiality following the language of mass production, but on the other hand, there is a disconcerting homeliness in the idea of 5 litre tins of roof paint. Nitegeka's tender redeployment of the materiality of high modernism also illustrates the imaginative possibilities that the modular can afford. Consider the pine and meranti timber roof trusses – 110 × 35 mm with 4 500 mm spans – blackened with Extreme Roof paint, which in *Door Installation* (2011) [fig. 1] simultaneously attempts to hold up and barricade the Michaelis Gallery door. Or in *Structural-Response I* (2012) [fig. 2], the same standardised beams gather themselves to support, perhaps even to protect, the structural columns of the Galerie Le Manège, Dakar. It is of course true that these beams form obstructions too, but it is also true that they are rather flimsy obstructions, penetrable assemblages. This penetrability is not incidental. Even Nitegeka's two-dimensional painted studies of his installations propose a way in or out, a journey through.

There is a temptation to describe these works then, as temporary, provisional and improvised, to use the language of the transit camp and informal settlement, rather than the permanent dwelling; there is also the temptation to use a concept like



fig. 1



fig. 2



Obstacle I: Studio Study I, 2012, paint on wood, two panels, 244 × 123,5 × 7,5cm each

nomadism. What is lost, however, with this interpretation, is the permanence that these arrangements and objects take on as works of art with the system of fixed value. While most of Nitegeka's largest installations are 'temporary' they are also fixed and arrested in his paintings. And indeed, the disassembled black beams have an afterlife; many are given away by the artist to technical support crews and so conceivably end up as building materials.

A persistent trope in the study of Southern modernisms is the post-apocalypse. This reading is especially common with respect to African modernisms, highlighting the ways in which so called neutral, humanistic ideologies failed to fulfil the optimistic possibilities of a promised future and instead operated as instruments of violence. Scholarship and artistic practice has been drawn to the ruin, the unfinished high rise, the pothole, the empty swimming pool and then to the innovative, desperate, creative reuse of these kinds of infrastructures.⁵ What is striking and exciting about Nitegeka's work is how difficult it is to read it through the lens of failure.

24/20

In 1974, along with numerous other Portuguese people living in Mozambique, architect Pancho Guedes left what was to become Maputo for self-enforced exile in Johannesburg. Under the 24/20 declaration, those who chose to leave the newly independent nation had twenty four hours to leave and were allowed twenty kilograms of belongings. In South Africa, the inventive modernist renovated a semi-detached Victorian townhouse by adding bizarre flourishes and curlicues and painting his new home pink, which he called the 'Consulate of Eclectica'.

In Angola a similar situation was iconically recorded by Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński in *Another Day of Life*.⁶ What Kapuściński describes in his chapter 'We're closing down the city' is the construction, on the pavements of the colonial concrete city, of a parallel wooden city of crates into which the belongings of the fleeing Portuguese were being deposited. These wooden structures containing 'whole salons and bedrooms, sofas, tables, wardrobes,



Black Lines installation view with *Fragile Cargo V* (2012, Wood, paint, 161 × 98.5 × 82.5cm) and *Fragile Cargo IV* (2012, wood, paint, steel, 200.5 × 81 × 30.5cm), Stevenson, Johannesburg

kitchens and refrigerators ... even artificial flowers, all the monstrous and inexhaustible junk that clutters every middle class home', whose inhabitants eventually left on cargo ships – floating cities – to South Africa, Brazil, Portugal and Israel. Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda produced *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* (2014), a single channel video artwork, in response to Kapuściński's rendering of this exodus. Kia Henda's meditation on the 'stripped skeleton' of Luanda evokes an 'asphyxiant condition, where future is lost and utopia failed'.⁷ Complemented by a series of drawings depicting modular crates, *Concrete Affection* grapples with very real consequences of plunder and the bare bones infrastructure that remains. José Eduardo Agualusa's novel *A General Theory of Oblivion* presents a parallel retelling of this architectural moment in Luanda.⁸ Abandoned by her sister and brother-in-law as they fled the city, the agoraphobic Portuguese protagonist Ludo bricks herself into her high-rise apartment. For twenty eight years she avoids the uncertainty of Angolan independence, surviving alone inside by burning all wood in her apartment, growing vegetables



Black Lines installation views with *Obstacle 1* (2012, wood, paint, 370 × 717 × 618cm), Stevenson, Johannesburg



Black Passage, 2015, installation view, Stevenson, Cape Town

on her balcony and trapping pigeons. Ludo's apartment is the interior scale of the city outside.

It is provocative to read Nitegeka's work against the images of this gutted modernist dwelling, the blackened wood and the doors that offer no exit, and the wooden crates lining the streets. While his arrangements and installations invoke the scale of the interior they are uncompromisingly without softness – no scatter cushions, no sofas, none of what interior decorators call 'softs'. This kind of tension is most apparent in Nitegeka's crate sculptures. For instance, in the *Fragile Cargo* series [fig. 3], masterfully constructed crates extend the promise of both movement and protection and yet in real terms offer neither. They are profoundly penetrable. While Kia Henda's concrete affection points to a failed utopia, Nitegeka's tender affection for the form and vocabulary of modernism gestures toward an optimism, however ambivalent. His affection is in no ways naive or sentimental. Neither is Nitegeka engaged in the repetition of



fig. 3 *Fragile Cargo VIII*, 2012, paint, wood and steel, 170 × 90 × 66cm

an empty formalist repertoire. In his experimentation with the modular conventions of form and colour Nitegeka is well aware of the racial and class issues encoded in black paint and recycled wooden pallets. The black subject is the scale of his oeuvre. The plywood that forms the base and structure of his work is far from neutral and it is certainly not deployed in a neutral manner. It has, I would argue, in spite of the tightly controlled colour palette of his work, a promise of pinkness.

The attempt to situate Nitegeka within a kind of speculative Southern modernism can potentially be generative of alternative movements though his work. It is hoped that by reading him against Brazilian, Chilean, Mozambican and Angolan structural responses to modernism we might be sensitised both to his place in the international context, and also to the particular promise at work in his cruel optimism.

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