

The Revolution Will be Downloadable

‘African Industrial Revolution,’ e-studio Luanda
Tiwani Contemporary, London

By Yvette Greslé

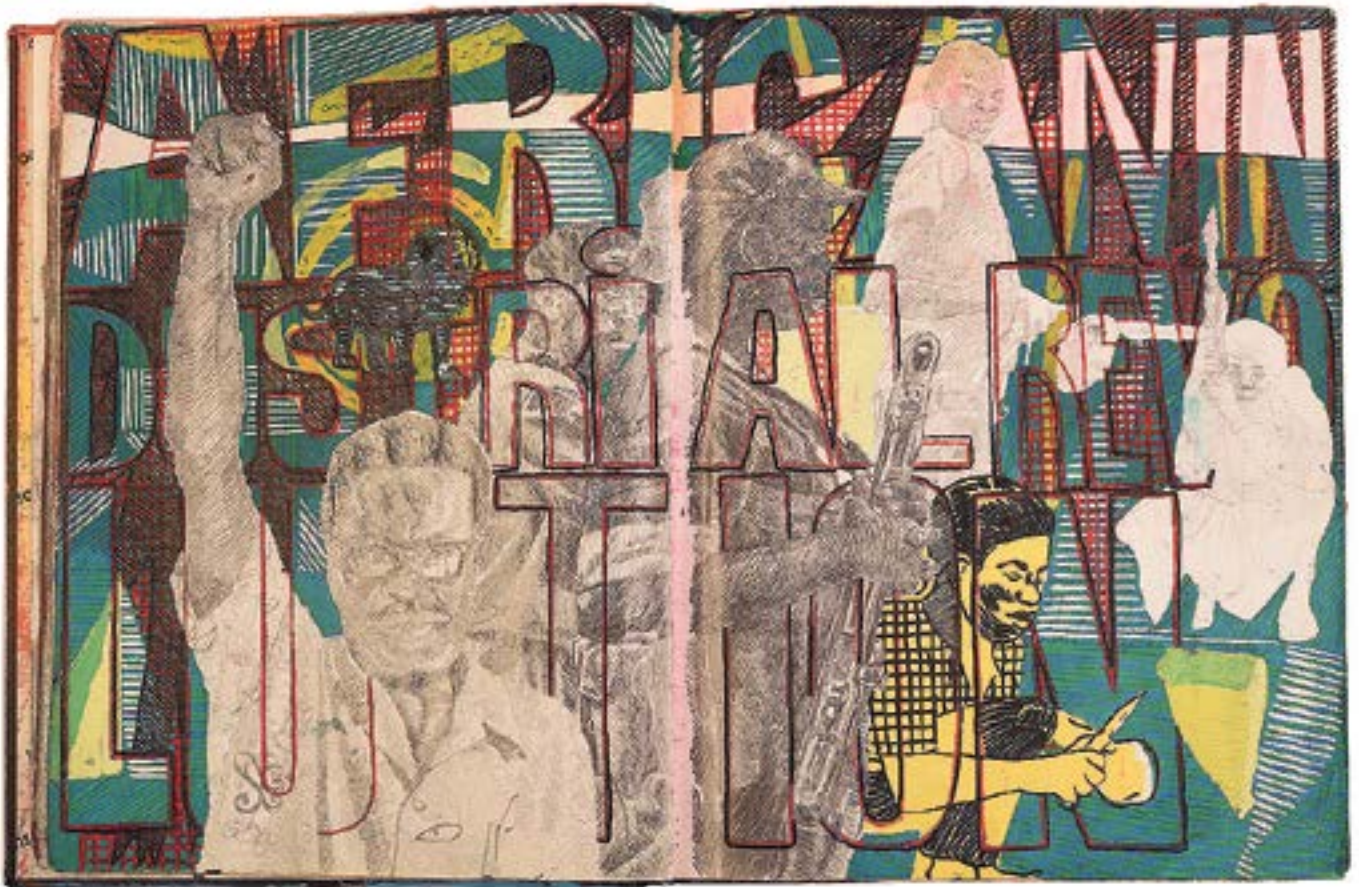
A project by the artist collective and studio complex e-studio Luanda, the exhibition ‘African Industrial Revolution (A.I.R.)’ brings the ordinarily private space of the artist’s studio to that of the gallery. Founded in 2012 in the Angolan capital, e-studio Luanda is the project of Francisco Vidal, Rita GT, António Ole and Nelo Teixeira. Two of the artists – Vidal and Rita GT – have staged this particular exhibition in London, while Vidal and Teixeira are part of the official selection for the Angolan Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, commissioned by Rita GT. In the exhibition space at Tiwani Contemporary, a plywood box called the *U.topia Machine*, containing an all-in-one toolkit for producing work speaks to the artist’s conceptual and pragmatic activation of strategies for a peripatetic life; travelling, working and living across geographical borders. Ideas of industry, aesthetic production, economic survival, making-do and the (now familiar) blurring of visual modes of fine art, design and craft are staged. Vidal and Rita GT speak of their ongoing intellectual relationship to theories and histories related to the social, utilitarian and aesthetic ideals of movements such as Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Both were born in Portugal and Vidal’s heritage spans Portugal, Angola and the Cape Verde Islands.

Portugal and Angola are historically enmeshed, both marked by histories of war and political violence. I think of Portugal’s colonial relationship to Angola and of Angola’s War of Independence (which lasted from 1961 to 1975). Angola declared independence in 1975, the same year that the civil war erupted, lasting until 2002. Portugal’s dictatorship lasted from 1926-1974. This exhibition suggests an optimism and impetus to survive despite the fragility that accompanies historical trauma and its memory, which may be inscribed overtly or opaquely. Imagined as a mobile studio, the show animates a conceptual idea of being on the move, of not settling in one place, perhaps by choice or necessity. The artists make use of resources that include transportable and accessible digital technologies; Vidal makes his own paper on-site. They relate the idea

of an ‘African Industrial Revolution’ to the post-war conditions of Angola and highlight the importance of industries linked to art and design to give life to ideas and engender economic regeneration and survival. Vidal says, “We went to Angola to work. What we could do there, as artists, was teach. There was no art school when we arrived (one recently opened.) There is a need for books, libraries and materials for artists. There are a lot of makers in Luanda, people who do a lot of creative things that have a purpose.”

The walls of Tiwani are transformed, floor to ceiling, by images that speak to both digital and handmade modes of production. There is a politics to the images, which have been printed off the Internet and then enlarged, transformed and mediated. Visual image searches on Google produce juxtapositions that yield tropes forged in relation to Western art historical canons, ethnographic picturing, auction houses and art markets. There is nothing unexpected in this idea of Africa reproduced through the Internet; it is the artist’s intervention that reconfigures a relationship to this archive, its digital life and how its vision is constituted. Familiar images, from Picasso’s Cubist phase to the ethnographic photograph, are now rendered less transparent; deliberately obscured by apparently banal juxtapositions ranging from reproductions of Photoshop windows to paint swatches. Digital renderings and references to technological tools for the construction, reproduction and alteration of images (which can also be political and ideological) are countered by painting and objects and patterned surfaces linked to design processes. In talking to the artists, they articulate an interest in fabric design, not simply as a functional and aesthetic object, but also in relation to the politics of particular patterns as well as the materials linked to histories of slavery, colonialism and labour. Women’s clothing, designed by Rita GT, is hung on a ladder next to the *U.topia Machine*.

A portrait, obscured by pattern and constructed from multiple sheets of thick, textured paper, is at once a painting and an object.



Francisco Vidal, *Untitled (African Industrial Revolution)*, 2015. Mixed media on notebook paper. Image courtesy of e-studio Luanda.

It is monumental in scale and reminiscent of images painted, officially or unofficially, on architectural structures in urban environments. These references to graffiti and spray-painting are present across the exhibition. The device of layering paper, transforming how we experience the gallery as an architectural space, produces a heightened awareness of how we relate to space psychically and affectively. The layered paper, suggestive of an architectural skin, appears either as blocks of colour or is embellished with organic forms. Entering Tiwani on the night of the private view I was struck by the atmospheric quality of the gallery space; transformed by music and the interaction invited by the activity of portraiture. Anyone visiting the show could ask Vidal to paint his or her portrait. These portraits were sketched with a paintbrush dipped in black India ink on ordinary A4 sheets of paper. As Vidal painted (sketched) my portrait, I was conscious of the performance embedded in the idea of portraiture as an art historical form, attentive to the character and dress of the sitter. I also thought of contemporary cultural practices

located in the idea of self-representation and performance, most obviously the 'selfies' we post on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter. The live performance of the portrait collapses the distance and sense of detachment ordinarily present between the artist and the viewer. By including images of culturally iconic figures – both living and dead – the collection of portraits suggests an ambiguous relationship to time and to our own mortality.

When talking to the artists about their practice, the relationship to history, place, and their cultural and geographical mobility is a significant aspect. Collectively they have studied, lived and worked across geographical borders in Europe (this includes Portugal, Berlin, Sweden), in New York and now in Luanda. Rita GT talks about going to Luanda for the first time from New York, "New York was very much about studio practice, competition, the gallery system and the art market. The move to Angola opened up and shifted our art practice. We can also be very useful there. There is a much closer relationship

to society. Living there is not just about remaining in our studio. In Angola, our role as artists takes the form of cultural activism. There is an emphasis on education and we are aware of the responsibility that comes with being an artist in this society."

The immersive installation, *A.I.R.*, is an ephemeral, mobile artist's studio. It speaks to how artists may currently inform economic, social and political narratives of survival, despite the power dynamics, priorities and exclusions constituted by capitalism – encountered as a global form with local inflections. While the historical legacies of Constructivism and the Bauhaus are foundational to the practices of both Vidal and Rita GT, it may be that e-studio Luanda are now in the process of formulating their own intellectual and aesthetic vocabulary and programme, situated within the world as it is now constituted, and through the specificities of their encounter with Luanda.

'African Industrial Revolution' was on at Tiwani Contemporary, London from 10 July - 15 August 2015.