

Villes-Noires - In A World Of Conversions, What Is The Urban To Be Governed?



At the Venice Biennale of 2013, the Danish Pavilion presented a video installation of Jesper Just that portrayed three black men navigating a large exurban development, Tianducheng, some 200 miles from Shanghai. Tianducheng is built as an immense replica of Paris, or more

precisely, an early modernist rendition of Paris. The city was initiated in the mid-2000's but remains largely under construction, and despite the aspirations for elegance, the rapidity and cheapness of the construction process renders much of the built landscape as already ruined. Additionally, the inhabitants of the city have largely altered the supposedly Parisian characteristics of the place, removing balconies, balustrades, and reworking the surfaces of buildings in order to make them more functional and long lasting. The black male characters assume different positions in relationship to this environment. One man is filmed walking through the expanse of the city as if carrying out some obligatory rite of passage that needs to be expeditiously experienced and then disposed of. Another presses his face closely to the surface of the buildings, inserting his body into their curvatures as if awaiting the words of some oracle, some secret to be revealed.

The exhibition demonstrates the simultaneously obdurate and exhausted imaginary of city form, the unyielding yet never kept promise of urban life. In contrast to the barriers and high costs entailed for Africans to access urban Europe—the supposed embodiment of “well-being”—the Chinese have mass-produced the surface representations of that well being as cheap knock-offs. But instead of simply bemoaning the kitsch of such simulations or the ways in which simulations take on a reality more real than their referents, the “provision” of Paris in Tianducheng offers a way of activating different networks of urban comparison and thus potential.

Read more:

Part one: <http://villes-noires.tumblr.com/one>

Part Two: <http://villes-noires.tumblr.com/two>

Part Three: <http://villes-noires.tumblr.com/three>