

THE
WALTHER COLLECTION

Jo Ractliffe

As Terras do Fim do Mundo
(The Lands of the End of the World)



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after visiting the exhibition

There are many myths about the civil war in Angola. Fought from 1975 to 2002, it engaged a series of conflicts that merged into what became one of the most complex and protracted wars ever fought in Africa. Alongside its local *raisons d'être*, the war also unfolded as a proxy Cold War, mobilised by external interferences, secret partnerships, and undeclared political and economic agendas—primarily on the part of the United States of America and South Africa—which then compelled Cuba's involvement and, somewhat reluctantly, that of the Soviet Union. All of this manifested various deceptions, from the violation of international agreements to illegal operations, covert funding and the provision of arms. It was a war of subterfuge, a fiction woven of half-truths and coverups. Even now, many of its stories remain untold.

I first read about Angola in *Another Day of Life*, Ryszard Kapuściński's book about events leading to Angola's independence from Portugal and its subsequent civil war. It was ten years after the book was written, a time when South Africa was experiencing increasing mobilisation against the forces of the apartheid government, which was also fighting its own war in Angola against the Namibian liberation movement, SWAPO. Until then, in my imagination Angola had been an abstract place. In the 1970s and early 80s, it was simply "The Border," a secret location where brothers and boyfriends were sent as part of their military service. And although tales about Russians and Cubans and the Cold War began to emerge—all of which conjured up a distinctly different image from the one conveyed by the South African state—it remained for me, a place of myth.

In 2007 I went to Luanda. It was five years since the war had ended and the city was wild with post-war energy and enterprise. Millions of people, displaced by the war, had come to the urban centre in search of a new future. While working on *Terreno Ocupado*, a second project began to suggest itself, one that would shift my attention away from the urban manifestation of aftermath to the space of war itself. Over the next two years I journeyed through what Portuguese colonials referred to as "As Terras do Fim do Mundo": the lands of the end of the world. I travelled with ex-soldiers, both South African and Angolan, who were going back to the places they had fought for the first time since the war.

The works of *As Terras do Fim do Mundo* explore how past trauma manifests in the landscape of the present, both forensically and symbolically. We live in a present space, but one that, as Jill Bennett notes in her essay, *A Concept of Prepossession*, "bears the marks (indelible and ephemeral, visible and invisible) of its history. And as much as we occupy places, they have the capacity to pre-occupy us."

Jo Ractliffe

From *Terreno Ocupado*



View of Boa Vista from Roque Santeiro market, 2007

Boa Vista is one of Luanda's largest *musséques* (slums). Situated on a steep bluff overlooking the harbour—its name means “good view”—it is a precarious home to the growing number of people who have been driven to the urban centre as a consequence of the war. People live without electricity (unless they have generators), running water, sanitation and refuse removal. Boa Vista's unstable sandy terrain is also easily eroded, often giving way to landslides during heavy rains. There have been instances where people have died when their homes were engulfed by water and mud. In 2006, Boa Vista was hit by an outbreak of cholera, the first major occurrence in nearly a decade. It spread quickly through the city and along the major highways to all but four of Angola's eighteen provinces, infecting over 54,000 people and claiming more than 2,000 lives.

From As Terras do Fim do Mundo



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale I, 2009

Markers such as this are frequently found along the roads and seem to have various functions, from identifying settlements to indicating safe paths through mined areas. Sometimes they also display goods or produce for sale. This assemblage shows sardine cans strung from a pole attached to the debris of an armoured vehicle.



Unmarked mass grave on the outskirts of Cuito Cuanavale, 2009

Located roughly 10 kilometres outside the town, this grave is said to contain the bodies of FAPLA soldiers, killed during the battle of Cuito Cuanavale.



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale IV, 2010

Marker comprising a military helmet, paint bucket and a fruit box made in China.



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale III, 2009

Terreno Ocupado translates loosely as “occupied land” and usually refers to land designated for future state use.



Mined forest outside Menongue on the road to Cuito Cuanavale, 2009

Angola is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world—second to Afghanistan. As the war unfolded, moving back and forth across the country without clear frontlines and between different armies, millions of mines were left in its wake. In the absence of proper record keeping, no one knows how many mines have been laid in Angola since 1961 when they were first used during the liberation war—some estimates are as high as 20 million.



Field with eucalyptus trees at Cassinga, 2009

The abandoned mining town of Cassinga had been allocated to SWAPO by the Angolan government in 1976 to accommodate the influx of refugees from Namibia. SWAPO maintained that Cassinga (codename: Moscow) was mostly inhabited by refugees and a “camp defence unit.” The SADF argued that Cassinga was SWAPO’s main operational headquarters in Southern Angola and a training base for new recruits—an idea reinforced by the presence of a Cuban unit at Techamutete, a town just 15 kilometres away. Assuming that SWAPO was preparing to disrupt South Africa’s plans to hold its own elections in Namibia, Operation Reindeer was conceived as a pre-emptive strike, with Cassinga one of three sites targeted. It was the SADF’s first major airborne assault, launched from its bases in Namibia 250 kilometres away.

According to official Angolan records 624 people were killed that day: 159 men, 167 women and 298 children— and 611 were wounded. An additional 150 Cuban soldiers, responding to the initial bombing at Cassinga, were killed by South African forces en route from their base at Techamutete. The SADF lost four men.



Mass grave at Cassinga I, 2010

There are two mass graves at Cassinga, both inscribed with the text “Massacre at Cassinga 4 May 1978” and “We Will Always Remember Them.”



Mass grave at Cassinga II, 2009



Abandoned cornfield near Indungo I, 2009

In addition to battlefields, transport routes and strategic sites, mines were also laid around villages and fields as a strategy to intimidate and control the movement of the civilian population, forcing many to abandon their homes and migrate to the cities. Every year hundreds of Angolans are killed or maimed by mines in all 18 of Angola's provinces, often while gathering wood or tending fields around their villages.



Abandoned cornfield near Indungo II, 2009



Scarecrow in a cornfield near Chitembo, 2009



Deminer near Cuvelai, 2009



Abandoned scarecrow near Menongue, 2010



Mine pit near Mucundi, 2009

According to Human Rights Watch, 37 different types of mines, manufactured in 15 different countries have been identified in Angola. There are many types of anti-personnel landmines, each designed to inflict a specific mutilation. Most common are blast mines, which detonate when stepped on. Just a few kilograms—the weight of a small child—can set them off. Fragmentation mines are made up of steel balls and when triggered, shoot out a myriad metal fragments in all directions, each at twice the speed of a bullet. Bounding fragmentation mines—“Bouncing Betty” or “Jumping Jack”—bounce up out of the ground usually to belly height and then unleash shrapnel in all directions across a 25-metre radius. Directional fragmentation mines shoot along a straight course and some, like stake mines, don’t need to be buried; they are attached to sticks or branches, activated when someone snags the hidden tripwire.

This pit contains the results of one day’s demining activity conducted alongside the road in sections, each measuring 15 metres wide by one kilometre long: 15 5-RPG7 rocket launchers, 14 mortar bombs, 15 antipersonnel blast mines, 2 POMZ anti-personnel fragmentation mines (also known as “sprinklers”) and many AK47 ammunition rounds.



In the forest on the road to Jamba, 2010



On the road to Jamba, 2010



Trees at Longa, 2009



Dusty bush, Savate, 2009



Woodland near Cassinga, 2009



Minefield near Mupa, 2009



Ambush site near Mupa, 2009



Battlefield near Caiundo on the way to Savate, 2009

32 Battalion, sometimes called Buffalo Battalion and also known as “Os Terríveis” (“The Terrible Ones”), was made up largely of black ex-FNLA Angolan soldiers, led by white South African officers. It was a controversial unit and one of the most highly decorated in the SADF. Operating almost exclusively inside Angola in a range of capacities against both Namibian and Angolan forces, 32 Battalion had a reputation for both boldness and brutality and claims more “enemy losses” than any other unit in the SADF. After the war, 32 Battalion was redeployed in the townships of South Africa and eventually disbanded in 1993. Many members joined private military and security companies such as Executive Outcomes.

21 May is remembered as Savate Day, in commemoration of the 1985 battle in which fifteen 32 Battalion members were killed, the biggest loss suffered in a single engagement.



Runway with helipad at Longa, 2009

Longa is situated on a hill next to a river on what the Russians, Cubans and Angolans called “The Road of Death.” The road became the target of many ambushes and air strikes by the SADF and UNITA, particularly during the final months of the war when large convoys of troops and supplies were sent from the FAPLA base at Menongue to the battlefield at Cuito Cuanavale. Fortified by trenches and with two long airstrips suitable for heavy aircraft, Longa provided a halfway station between the two towns during the war.



Parade ground, FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010

Lobito is one of Angola’s three main ports and the Atlantic terminal of the Benguela Railway. Until war broke out in 1975, the railway ran through the central highlands all the way to Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia —the only line connecting central Africa to the coast. Positioned on high ground overlooking the sea, this base formed a point of connection between those at Lubango to the east and Namibe in the south. It also served as a training base for FAPLA and SWAPO recruits and included Russian and Cuban military personnel as teachers and advisors.



“Comfort Station,” FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010

Although seldom officially acknowledged, military prostitution has been integral to the practice of warfare for centuries. On some SADF veterans’ websites is a story that during the 1980s, the SADF recruited prostitutes in an attempt to infect Cuban troops with HIV/AIDS. While there is little evidence to substantiate this claim, in the mid-1980s, Cuba began testing all military personnel posted abroad.



Hillside graves near Dombe Grande, 2010



Tundavala Gorge, Lubango, 2010

During the early 1990s, human bones were found at the bottom of Tundavala, giving rise to stories that dissidents and suspected spies were thrown off the cliff into the gorge during the post-1992 election conflict.



Mural in an abandoned schoolhouse, Cauvi, 2010



Burning field, Dombe Grande, 2010



Mural, FAPLA base, Chinguar, 2010



Stone map of Angola, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010

The base is 45 kilometres south of Namibe and lies about 10 kilometres from the sea. It covers roughly six square kilometres in a complex network of trenches, anti-aircraft defences and underground bunkers. The base seems to have been constructed in 1982—the date scratched into the concrete of one of the bunkers—and was dismantled in 1988 at the end of the war. It may have been established by the Cuban 50th Division, which was mobilising in the southwest in preparation for a possible invasion into Namibia in the late 1980s.



SAM missile bunkers, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010

Surface to Air Missiles are launched against aircraft from the ground. Small SAMs, known as MANPADS (Man-Portable Air Defence Systems) can be carried and launched by a single person—the Stinger Missile, for example. Large land-based SAMs are fired from fixed installation platforms—such as those once housed in these bunkers—or mobile launchers, and even from ships. Until 1985, the SAAF held air superiority in southern Angola, flying Mirage F1AZ fighter-bombers. The arrival of MiG-23s however, which boasted better acceleration and superior missiles with head-on firing capacity, shifted the advantage to the Cubans, who dominated the skies in the latter years of the war. This base would have been operational during the late 1980s and its air defence system may also explain why South African pilots were reluctant to fly over southwest Angola from bases in Namibia.



Turning circle, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010

Stone paths like this were used to mark roads, runways, vehicle parking lots and also as connecting pathways between bunkers. This base was well camouflaged; small metal stakes found along all the trenches indicate they were once covered with camouflage netting. And at night, without light to guide direction, such path markers would have been critical when moving between stations.



Remains of the trench system, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010

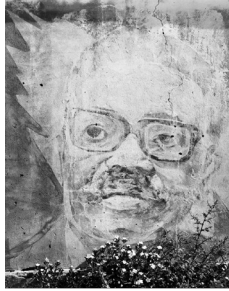
The base was surrounded by a fortified trench, which at various points also had paddling pools—small circular hollows lined with cement, with steps leading waist-deep below the surface.



Stone cairns and circles, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010



Bunker, Cuban base, Namibe, 2009



Mural depicting Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev, painted on the wall of a house circa 1975, Viriambundo, 2009

"The Great Epic of Cuba in Africa" began when Che Guevara entered the Congo in 1965 and ended in 1991 with the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola after the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Cuba's foreign policy was one of solidarity with national liberation movements in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Known as "Internationalism," it included the provision of military and medical aid to these movements. Half a million Cubans took part in liberation wars in Africa, 400,000 of them serving in Angola between 1975 and 1991. The record of Cuban casualties in Angola has never been released but it is estimated that over 2,000 died. Internationalist missions continue today, primarily in health care and education.



Mural, FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010

The text alongside this mural proclaims "Socialismo O Muerte." It is one of many wall murals along the road leading into the base, which are inscribed with portraits and texts of socialist leaders, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.



Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe I, 2009

This tableau is located roughly 30 kilometres south of the base at Namibe. On top there is a truck tire, in the centre of which is a cooking pot and a Chinese military helmet, with two wine bottles placed at its side. The helmet has two bullet holes in it— straight through where the temple would have been.



Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe II, 2010

This assemblage was constructed sometime between June 2009 and May 2010. It comprises a dead bush stuck into the sand with a man's shirt hanging from its branches and an MPLA cap placed above it. The funnel here was removed from the other memorial (which still stands) and the whole structure was encircled by a ring of white stones.



Soldiers training in the desert, near Namibe, 2009



My tent at Longa, 2009



The battlefield at Cuito Cuanavale, 2009

The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale was the longest battle in Africa since World War II and one of the most significant. It has also become known as “The Battle for Africa,” after Fidel Castro proclaimed, “From now on the history of Africa will have to be written before and after Cuito Cuanavale.” It was a momentous fight that went on for nearly a year and produced no clear winner although everyone claims victory. It ended, not on the battlefield but around the negotiating table, the result of which was Namibia’s independence and the withdrawal of Cuban and South African armed forces from Angola, and effectively—as international interests shifted elsewhere—the end of the Cold War in Africa. But in the aftermath, Angola’s civil war continued until the death of UNITA’s rebel leader, Jonas Savimbi in 2002.

The statistics of casualties at Cuito Cuanavale vary depending on the source. According to SADF records, 7,855 soldiers died at Cuito Cuanavale: Cuban Army: 39 (official); SADF: 31 (official); FAPLA: 4,785 (estimate); UNITA 3,000 (estimate).

Additional images from the portfolio *As Terras do Fim do Mundo*



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale II, 2009 Marker with a plastic baby chair and upturned bucket.



Ring-barked tree near Indungo, 2009
Trees used for the making of charcoal.



Burnt trees near Indungo, 2009



Leba Pass, 2010

Descending from 1,689 metres to sea level, Leba Pass connects the highlands of Humpata and Lubango to the southern coastal desert of Namibe. At Humpata there is a memorial to the group of Afrikaners known as the Dorsland Trekkers, who left Pretoria in 1874 in search of political independence after the British annexed the Transvaal. In a series of treks, they journeyed through Botswana and Namibia. In 1881, the survivors finally reached Humpata where they settled.

In the early 1980s, SADF Special Forces, using Puma helicopters, blew up the top three sections of Leba Pass in an attempt to destroy the supply line between FAPLA bases at Lubango and Namibe.



Monument at Ebo, 2009

This monument commemorates the MPLA/Cuban victory over South African, FNLA and UNITA forces at the Battle of Ebo on 23 November 1975—the SADF's first defeat during Operation Savannah. It displays the debris of a Cessna airplane shot down during a reconnaissance mission and an Eland armoured vehicle, captured by the Angolans during this clash. The bodies of four South African soldiers remain buried nearby in graves tended by local Angolans.



Military cache south of Dombe Grande, 2010

Caches were used during the war for the temporary storage of food, water and weapons, especially in areas such as along this desert road, where such supplies could be scarce. Empty sardine cans— expiry date: 2011— suggest that this cache is still in use, probably by truck drivers journeying between Namibe and Lobito.



Mural in an abandoned schoolhouse, Ompapa, 2010

Index of Acronyms

FAPLA: Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola (Armed Forces of the Liberation of Angola), later became FAA: Forças Armadas de Angola (Angolan Armed Forces)

FNLA: Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), liberation movement led by Holden Roberto, which after independence, was largely absorbed into the South African Defence Force (SADF)

MPLA: Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), Marxist based liberation movement, led by Agostinho Neto, which came into power at independence and was supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union during the civil war.

SAAF: South African Air Force

SADF: South African Defence Force

SWAPO: South West African People's Organisation, Namibian liberation movement led by Sam Nujoma, which came into power when Namibia was granted independence in 1990.

UNITA: União Nacional para Independência Total de Angola (National Union for Total Independence of Angola), Angolan liberation movement opposing MPLA, led by Jonas Savimbi and supported by South Africa and the USA during the war. During the war, the Reagan administration provided extensive funding and arms to Savimbi, including Stinger missiles.

POM-Z: Soviet anti-personnel fragmentation stake mine

RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade