
Crisis Averted

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What endears me to the medium of photography is not only its capacity to transfix, but also its ability to transport me. As Geoff Dyers so clearly expressed in his seminal text, *The Ongoing Moment*, as ‘soon as we are moved by it, we are ready to move on’.¹ The notion of the definitive photograph has long been lost in the later 20th century tumult of media disillusionment, the advent of Photoshop, and the death of the author. No one should be looking at photographic images for truth; we know that what we see is a slice, a metonym, standing in the place of the whole picture. Yet when it comes to images of Africa, particularly those falling into the ambiguous category of ‘documentary photography’ we have come to expect the impossible – a presentation, with the “re” of “reality” inherent in its “representation”.

American Dorothea Lange, who earned her acclaim through her commissioned photography of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during Roosevelt’s New Deal in the Great Depression, stated that the ‘camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera’.¹ If one looked at this statement’s context in the history of American photography, the late 19th century work of policeman-cum-photomoralist, Jacob Riis is brought sharply into focus. His debated series, *How the Other Half Lives*, reflects this individual’s perspective of immigrant communities living in (ostensibly) high-density slums around New York City’s docks over a century ago. Riis’s intrusive flash and the unapologetic nature of his presence in these private spaces explain the power problematics of this series in contemporary documentary conversations. The sordid monochrome depictions of poverty in America’s most iconic metropolis are hard to swallow even now, knowing what we know of one of the once-greatest economic super powers. Despite this moment of visual crisis, spectators, like 20th century American photographic tradition, have since moved on, refusing to rehash these kinds of depictions purely for the sake of nostalgia.

This transition is perhaps not so evident in Africa’s diverse photographic traditions. In Binyavanga Wainaina’s ‘How to Write about Africa’², he caustically lists and decodes the tropes of subjects in 20th century representations of Africa, from smiling black children with Kwashiorkor bellies to landscapes ravaged by Aids and War ‘(use caps)’³. The exclusion of all things urban is obviously essential. The sardonic tone of his analysis resounds of the crisis for critical creatives working to move away from the patronised branding of “Africa”, by complicating the continent’s iconography and introducing multi-layered perspectives on the city, as a part of that.

Labels are a problem when addressing the issue of South African artistic representatives working abroad, says Clive Kellner, director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.⁴ Constantly defined by their geography, the work of these artists is simultaneously affirmed and contained by their status as “African”, a term which inevitably lingers on the borders of provincialism, racialism and modernism, fulfilling Wainaina’s ironic expectations. This position hardly provides the contemporary, urban ‘anti-texts’⁵ required for us spectators living on and off the continent to be moved by and on from stale perspectives of a contrastingly dynamic present.

¹ Dyer, G. 2005. *The Ongoing Moment*. Abacus: London, 31.

In their discussion of Johannesburg as one of the continent's dynamically elusive hallmarks of postcolonial cosmopolitanism, Mbembe and Nuttall discuss how best to 'overturn... perpetual and predominant imaginings of Africa'⁶. They state that these imaginings, even contemporary ones, are largely relegated to the fields of social science rather than those of critical arts where aesthetic and cultural values are sacrificed on the altar of objective study. The refusal of artistic autonomy in an individual's self-representation results in what could be called a distinctly static sidelong glance (even from within local spheres) at how the other half lives here. Defending the medium's dynamism however, in his text "A Moving City", Rory Bester describes photography as capturing 'a unique representation of the city within a critical framework that acknowledges its subjectivity'.⁷ He continues:

the photograph offers a form of evidence of the movements, routes and maps of bodies in space that is unparalleled in social research... photographic practice encapsulates the nexus of what the city is planned to be and what its inhabitants make of it.⁸

This messy permeability between boundaries means that the African metropolis can only be represented with difficulty (de Certeau would see this as a result of the city's 'poetic geography'⁹). While perhaps easily absorbed into development discourse, photographs of the contemporary African metropolis, regardless of whether or not they belong to the documentary tradition, lay bare something of these sites of transition – the incessant flux between rural and urban, private and public, tradition and cosmopolitan life experienced by most of the population. And though the medium may never be completely panoramic, photography succeeds in bringing fragments of the postcolonial city's character crisis into some coherence. According to editor of *Art South Africa*, Sean O'Toole, photographs are able to withstand the almost 'ineffable'¹⁰ resistance of the cosmopolitan urban landscape to being *shown* by acknowledging their own individualised view-point within a sea of shifting sites of significance. More than half a century later, the camera is still enabling us to see without the lens.

With conversations around Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu's coined phrase 'Afropolitanism'¹¹ growing ever louder the need also increases for artistic infrastructure to critically represent something of the aesthetic inherent in this trans-cultural 'way of being in the world'.¹² Mbembe's "Afropolitanism"¹³ essay fell within the context of the blockbuster survey exhibition – *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, curated by Simon Njami. The problematic existence of shows purporting to single-handedly represent an entire continent in contemporary context is another discussion. Together with *Snap Judgments: New positions in contemporary African photography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, these exhibitions signify an attempt (at least) at more global, multi-dimensional thinking in relation to images from and about Africa – with the apprehension of urban landscape as a major theme. Looking at the spunky perspectives of urban fashion by young Nonsikelelo 'Lolo' Veleko and Pascale Martine Tayou's palimpsestic exploration of *L'urbanité rurale* (2004-5) 'should help us change our view of Africa'¹⁴ according to the Centre Pompidou, Paris (one of *Africa Remix's* many non-African venues).

Pushing the curatorial boundaries of artistic projects that engage with African metropolises is a political act of making the invisible more visible – challenging the tradition of voyeurism with which these representations have previously been met.¹⁵ Indeed, as a localised response to these larger exhibitions, the recent showing of South African urban landscape photography by curators Dave Southwood and Michael Godby made up *Cities in Crisis* in Johannesburg's FADA gallery. The weight

of the exhibition's subject was further enhanced by its conjunction with the university colloquium, 'Johannesburg and the Megacity Phenomena'.¹⁶ To represent on a more autobiographical level, the practitioners' presencing of themselves in cityscapes around the country was the clear curatorial intention. These 'heterogenous viewpoints'¹⁷ include those of South African photographers working in documentary fields: the unflinchingly analytical, David Goldblatt and socially concerned, Mikhael Subotzky, as well as practitioners dealing in an artistic vocabulary – even including seemingly politically irrelevant essays such as David Lurie's *Images of Table Mountain* (2002). This collection of images is meant to *move* the spectator from merely looking, to some responsive engagement (critically or emotionally) – never professing to provide a final standpoint on the sites reflected. The curators see this presentation as the first phase of *Cities* that acknowledges the crisis inherent in any fixed, oversimplified identity attached to the showing of photography in and about Africa. They aim to continue the project, allowing it to develop in other forms.

According to Tuakli-Wosornu, the Afropolitan is unafraid of complicating his or her expectations of their "home" continent. With this refusal to represent cosmopolitan public culture in African cities once off or two-dimensionally, comes the suggestion by Chinua Achebe to rather embrace the seemingly contradictory pictures of famine and fame, xenophobia and multiculturalism, savannah and slum proffered by contemporary photographers (both documentary and journalistic).¹⁸ Rather than banishing survey exhibitions, which only, if ever, make it to the African continent by the skin of their teeth, or dismissing media images of xenophobic attacks as decontextualised it is the co-existence of these sometimes essentialising, sometimes spectacular, and other times nuanced perspectives, which keep the continent's crisis of representation moving. If photography can mediate the imaginings of a few, challenge expectations of the "other half" in Africa, and help spectators to envisage the texts and anti-texts being written on a daily basis by the hyper-mobile city dweller, then surely the crisis is no longer of how to represent the city but how to keep up with it.

Notes

¹ Quoted by Dyer, p.9

² B. Wainaina, B, "The View from Africa", in *Granta*, (London: Granta Books, 2005), pp.91-95

³ Wainaina, p. 95

⁴ Kellner is quoted by Sean O'Toole in his article, "Weighing the African in South African", in *Frieze*, June 2008.

⁵ M. De Certeau expands on this in his chapter, "Walking the City", in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p.107

⁶ A. Mbembe & S. Nuttall, "Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis", in *Public Culture*, 16(3) 2004, p.351

⁷ R. Bester, "A Moving City", in *Johannesburg Circa Now – Photography and the City*, T. Kurgan and J. Ratcliffe (eds) (Johannesburg: Kurgan and Ratcliffe, 2005) pp.10-15

⁸ *Ibid*, pp.10-15

⁹ De Certeau, p.105

¹⁰ S. O'Toole, 2005, "Saying Nothing," in *Johannesburg Circa Now – Photography and the City*, pp.18-27.

¹¹ T. Tuakli-Wosornu, "Bye-Bye Barbar", in *LIP #5 Africa*, 2005

¹² Mbembe's use of the term is quoted by Sean O'Toole in his article, "Weighing the African in South African", in *Frieze*, June 2008.

¹³ A. Mbembe, "Afropolitanism", in (*Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Jacana Press: Johannesburg, 2007) pp. 26-30.

¹⁴ "Dossier de Press", from *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Centre Pompidou: Paris, 2005.

¹⁵ Rory Bester further elaborates this notion of the politics of action and passivity in spectatorship in his paper, "Cities, Photography and Research", in *Cities in Crisis: Photographic Representations of South African Cities*, (2008) online [available] http://www.citiesincrisis.com/pages/curators_BESTER.html.

¹⁶ University of Johannesburg, 9-11 April 2008.

¹⁷ M. Godby. "Cities in Crisis: Photographic Representations of South African Cities," (2008) online [available] http://www.citiesincrisis.com/pages/curators_GODBY.html

¹⁸ C. Achebe, quoted by Sean O'Toole in "Weighing the African in South African", in *Frieze*, June 2008.