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Mediated Photography

LARD BUURMAN

Biography

Lard Buurman (b. 1969, the Netherlands) studied at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, where he graduated in 1997 from the Photography Department. He researched the use of digital photography techniques in the practice of documentary. With his constructed “cinematic” photography, he seeks to capture the movement and dynamic of the city in still images. Buurman does not present the truth of the moment but the everyday reality of the place. His work has been shown in the Netherlands (at SMBA and Looiersgracht 60 in Amsterdam, and the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam) and abroad (at the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg, South Africa; Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, Germany; Lagos Photo in Nigeria; and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark).

In the spring of 2008, I started a photographic project about African cities. Soon I decided that this project would become my first book, *Africa Junctions: Capturing the City*.[1] Working with this medium, which was new to me, I noticed that my research method shifted. Choosing a new medium for my photography made me rethink my work. Since this project, I have become more aware of all sorts of platforms I can use to show my work. An exhibition, a book, or even a lecture about the project offer a variety of contexts in which I'm required to think about what I want to express and how I want to mediate photography. For instance, I never share stories in the image captions, yet I do tell them in lectures or interviews.[2]

A Constructed Reality

In my work, I combine the documentary aspects of photography with the fictive aspects of the digital construction of the image. To do this, I recreate the photographic image in a collage form by using many different exposures made from the same perspective. Thus I create in retrospect the photographic moment. One could say that this is how I undermine photography's claim to truth. Even though we live in times in which we all know that a photograph is not reality, in documentary photography any manipulation of the moment is still considered taboo—erroneously, I think, because each photograph *is* a manipulation of reality. The recorded frozen moment itself is a construction of photography. I like to see my images as a possible remembrance of a place, one that comes closer to my perception of reality than to the photographical moment.

In my photographs, I do not want to capture so much the reality of the moment, but rather the everyday reality of the place. The combination of images from multiple "documentary" photographs creates a hybrid form between documentary and staged photography. At the same time, I play with the possibility of crossing into cinematography. I connect the static immediacy of the singular photographic *snap* with the energy innate to the movement of cinema. In this way I have developed a personal photographic language.

Photo 5 shows the daily street life on Mulungushi Road in the Ng'ombe extension in Lusaka, Zambia. As an example, I will describe how this picture came to existence, that is, by using a digital collage technique, and why I work this way. This was the first photo I took in a sprawl area and my first experience with such a neighborhood. Before I went to Zambia, I had read a lot about sprawl and slum areas, and had been confused about the statistics. When I read Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*,[3] I felt like he was describing a dystopia, because I couldn't imagine how people could live in a sprawl area. On the plane to Zambia, I wondered if my approach would be morally correct. Could I stand by my idea of showing daily life in such neighborhoods without using photography as a means to show the world how bad these places are, as seems to be a common practice with photojournalists?

Walking down Mulungushi Road, I saw a poor area with small and simple housing. People were walking in front of me. The image you see is more or less what made me decide to take a picture. I stopped and took out my camera. Once I looked through the lens, I saw some children running toward me. Within two clicks of my camera a

group of children was posing and playing in front of me. During those ten minutes I took pictures on this spot, they stayed and were constantly smiling and looking into the camera. The situation was familiar to me. It was the positive version of a Red Cross image—a group of playful children interacting with a photographer. I was surprised that I didn't have to do anything for it, just to stop and take out my camera. This was not the scene that made me decide to take a picture. I had to construct this image from several photos to be able to show the normal daily life of people passing by on the street. For this photo I shot thirty-five images, of which I used a selection of twelve to make this documentary collage.

Spatial Choreography

A recurring theme in my photography is urban public space. Space is not only defined by buildings, architecture, and infrastructure, but above all by the people who inhabit the space. My interest is first of all in these people: their use of the city, the functioning of public space, and the (co)habitation in an urban landscape.

Instead of focusing on standard architectural highlights or the typological clichés of public space—the square, the marketplace, the park—I focus on "people as infrastructure." This is also the title of an essay by AbdouMaliq Simone,[4] an urbanist and sociologist who tries to shift our attention away from the typical "hard" focus on urban development and toward the infrastructural significance of fluid streams of people. Therefore, the human body and the movements of individuals and groups play an important role in my photographs. I pay attention to people's poses and the shapes that bodies take through acts like walking, waiting, and carrying. I let the movement of the city resonate in an image and turn it into a metaphor for the changeability and flexibility of these cities and their inhabitants.
I call this spatial choreography.

Photo 1 is an ode to the motorcycle taxis in Lagos that, due to traffic jams, I was very dependent on. In the background you can see a sign of the growing influence of China in Lagos: a new Chinese hotel. This location is the border between two motorcycle taxi regions; people have to change here to another motorcycle taxi to continue their journey. I created the scene, a choreography of motorcycle taxis, by taking lots of images in a timespan of about twenty minutes.

Capturing the City

In my project *Africa Junctions: Capturing the City* I show African cities and their developments by focusing on everyday street scenes. I walk through areas and notice the chaos of the fragmented, segregated, and hectic cities, but first and foremost I notice the everyday life that takes place amid this overwhelming bustle.

The "commonplace" remains my point of departure for my constructed images. In an African context, this proves to be a deviating view. In most documentaries about Johannesburg, we see armed robberies. In Lagos, so-called "area-boys" are leading the show. It is true, but it is part of a larger context that remains largely unseen. Apparently the everyday is not fascinating enough. I choose a panoramic image of the city, from new housing projects and the central business district to the slums. In these

different areas, I look at street life and the urban space. I "de-dramatize" the image. Since I started working in African cities, I have been asking myself new questions about the term "documentary photography." In this project, I started to see my role more as a documentarian and a storyteller, as a documentary photographer and an artist. The story about the commonplace in African cities is surprisingly omnifarious. Its multi-faceted complexity and the forms of urban cultures, which were completely new to me, have led me to rethink the European city life with which I'm familiar. I've become more aware of the social segregation in Amsterdam. Coming back form a trip to an African city, it took me some time to readjust. I missed the street life. Now, in times of the corona-virus, Amsterdam's street life reminds me a bit more of African cities. Before corona, the city was crowded due to the large number of tourists, but in a one-dimensional way. Nowadays the streets and parks are full of people who meet each other, play sports, and have diner. There is always something to see.

Notes:

1. Buurman 2014.
2. Essays in *Africa Junctions: Capturing the City* by N'gone Fall, Chris Abani, and Alexander Opper show the broader context of ideas about cities in Africa. Chris Keulemans's interview with me gave me the opportunity to share my ideas, but mostly they were the ideas of the many people that inspired me to look at African cities in the first place.
3. Davis 2006.
4. Simone 2004: 407–29.

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- Buurman, Lard and authors. 2014. *Africa Junctions: Capturing the City.* Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
- Davis, Mike. 2006. *Planet of Slums*. London / New York: Verso Books.
- Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2004. "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16 (3): 407–29.

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Image Captions: All photos: Lard Buurman.

Fig. 1 Oniru Estate, Lagos, Nigeria, 2009 / 2013.

Fig. 2 Maroko Road, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria, 2009 / 2010.

Fig. 3 Ponte de Vila du Gamek, Luanda, Angola, 2009 / 2010.

Fig. 4 Soccer Fields I & II, Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya, 2010 / 2014.

Fig. 5 Mulungushi Road, Lusaka, Zambia, 2008 / 2009.

Fig. 6 Clock Tower Ground, Kampala, Uganda, 2009 / 2013.

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