

Rut BLEES LUXEMBURG

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(Selection)

# STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHIES — CHALLENGE OF THEIR VISUALIZATION

SASKIA SASSEN

RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG

*Black Sunrise*, 2010, C-print, 120 x 155 cm, framed.  
Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.







There is an interesting interaction between the two categories I was asked to address: photography and geography. Both signal visualities of all sorts; further, they signal a kind of objectivity with their *graphos*. There is almost a presumption of a one to one with the *x* that is being *graphed*; and this peculiar objectivity holds even when the *x* being graphed is actively constituted by the gaze of the 'grapher'.

I want to experiment with the thesis that notwithstanding all this *graphos*, both geography and photography obscure as much as they make visible. That is to say, I want to problematize these visualities. Each produces a penumbra around what they make visual. In my own research I experience an equivalent tension between the legible and what it obscures precisely because of its capacity to make legibility. Thinking conceptually, this would mean that the more powerful the explanation, the more difficult it is to see/understand what it obscures precisely because of that power; as if this were not enough, it can obscure in ways that make this obscuring invisible. There in lie the power and the danger of powerful categories.

Geographies are an abstraction - topographies might be closer to the actual visual experience of a terrain, a ground. In that geographic abstraction lies something potentially more illuminating than a 1 to 1 description between the geographical account and the reality it seeks to capture. Also photography obscures something, and it does this actively, not casually or accidentally. It does so through the photographic rendering of an image, an operation that inevitably will be a partial capturing of what is the object of the photography. But in so doing it also allows us to see, conceivably, what we cannot see with the naked eye - because the naked eye is burdened by an excess of details, or by an excess of perspectives which can have the effect of blurring, whereas photography can extract, isolate, and make clear.

In short, it seems to me that neither geography nor photography are simply about *graphos*, description. They are also about the non-image - all the other presences that hover in the shadows of the image. The power of the visual becomes also the power of what the visual can obscure.

How then does this enter into the relation between photography and geography: more specifically, the types of photography and geography that deal with the realities of our life today in this world at this time. What are some of the geographies of our time, and what does it mean to make them photographically visual. Given my own work, the focus will be on what we might think of as strategic geographies, some of which may not be so familiar because they are emergent.

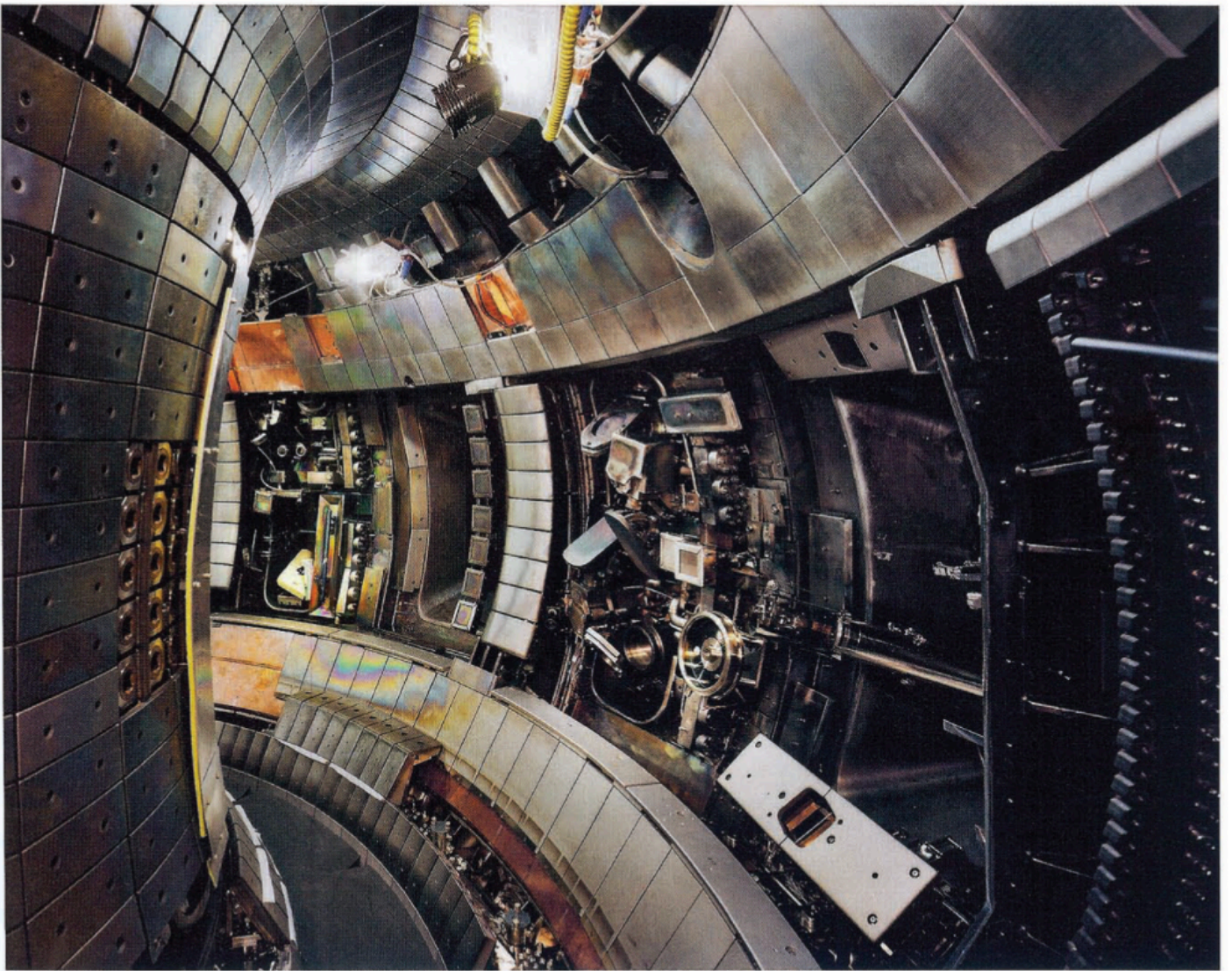
#### When time and territory seep out of the cages of nation-states

At its most foundational, I think of photography as able to capture worlds that become visible when we break prevalent conceptual and operational cages that house our life, our imaginaries, our spaces. Among these are the cages into which territory and time have been pushed (though never succeeding completely!) over the last few centuries by the project of making nation-states built on voracious corporate capitalisms and contestatory citizenries.

#### Can photography capture this?

There is visuality in this project of nation-states to build standardized, bureaucratized, and nationalized cages for housing time and territory. For centuries, national states and their enactors worked at nationalizing territory, identity, security, power, rights - in brief, all the key elements of social and political existence. When the national state is the dominant format, the overarching dynamic is centripetal: the centre grasps most of what there is to be had. Those nationalizing dynamics assembled the pieces of what we now experience as the national and, too often, the "natural".





THOMAS STRUTH

*Tokamak Asdex Upgrade Interior 2, Max Planck IPP, Garching, 2009, C-print, 141,6 x 176 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.*





RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG  
*Narrow stage*, 1998, C-print, 150 x 180 cm framed.  
 Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.

What happens outside the borders of territorial states – whether the impoverished terrains of former empires or the earth's still frozen poles, long written out of History.

Salgado is one photographer that breaks these cages open through a visuality that inserts enormous distance – whether in his Sahel or Genesis project.<sup>1</sup> In this distance I see theorization. It is a visuality more akin to the Greek notion of *theoria* than to the visual as representation.<sup>2</sup>

Can photography also capture what is not completely recognized.

What we innocently call the global climate crisis is partly what we exported out of these cages into a *putative* no-man's land – that other geography constructed as part of the making of capitalism. But such a no-man's land does not exist, and never did. It is actually the atmosphere, the water, the earth, once seemingly distant, that is now knocking at our door. It was never so distant for the poor in the Global South and the disadvantaged in the rich countries who have been far more exposed to toxicity than the privileged. The glaciers, once remote and immobile, are now increasingly mobile liquids touching "us". And the multitudes of disadvantaged everywhere are becoming actors on a global stage. Neither the glaciers nor these multitudes can be kept in that putative no-man's land upon which powerful shapers of our modernity thought they could rely.

Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* project took him over a long distance to find a territory that was beyond that putative no-man's land, a



1 Audrey Singer.  
Interview with Sebastião Salgado. *Contexts*, 2010.  
See also Sebastião Salgado, *Migrations* (New York: Aperture, 2000).

2 Saskia Sassen, "Black and White Photography as Theorizing: Seeing What the Eye Cannot See." *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 2 (2011): 438–443.

3 Audrey Singer.  
Interview with Sebastião Salgado. *Contexts*, 2010.

4 Hilary Koob-Sassen, 2008. "Faith in Infrastructure." *Manifesto*, Serpentine Gallery, London, October 2008. [http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2008/05/park\\_nights\\_manifesto\\_marathon.html](http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2008/05/park_nights_manifesto_marathon.html)

5 Sebastião Salgado, *Genesis*. Retrieved September 20, 2010 at: <http://www.amazonasimag-es.com/grands-travaux?HPHSESSID=2a078b639171f014f597ee841c223fcb>.

territory where we can still find a complex, almost untouched biosphere and a part of our mankind that has not been flattened by oppression and consumerism. In Salgado's words (2010), *Genesis* is an attempt to portray the beauty and the majesty of regions that are still in a pristine condition<sup>3</sup>.

I have little doubt that photography can capture/graph, like no text can, the immediacy of today's catastrophic conditions: the melting of the glaciers, the radicalness of today's poverty, the violence of extreme economic inequality, the genocidal character of more and more wars. My question is can it capture this only as a sort of new occurrence? But they are not new occurrences. On the contrary, they have long been part of that putative no-man's land that absorbed the costs of making nation-states and capitalism. Can photography capture that which was pushed into a space not visible from the "centre" of the world. Can it engage and show us that active making of the minutiae of human and environmental destruction in a putative no-man's land. Can it show us the centuries-old histories that we are only now seeing, and seeing as new.

These conditions have existed for a long time, but today they are crossing new thresholds and, crucially, they become legible as the cages of the national begin to fall apart and reveal the landscapes of devastation on which they were built. Our over-cantilevered bridge cannot cope with the warming waters below<sup>4</sup>.

#### When powerlessness becomes complex

As territory and time seep out of the old nation-state cages they begin to constitute a proliferation of partial, often highly specialized, assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights once firmly ensconced in national institutional frames. I find these new formations can include oppressive as well as emancipatory moves.

These are the elements, the building blocks for new global geographies. They can be thick, sub-national settings or vast and thin translocal networks. They are not the globalities that run through supranational institutions that take out that thickness and produce thin generalizations across differences. What I am thinking of here, at one extreme, are globalities marked by localisms and by immobilities. I do not see this as a contradiction. Once territory and time seep out of the cages of the national, the immobile can be global actors even if their bodies do not cross the borders of national states; they can be part of global subjectivities and politics even as they are immobile on the newly destabilized ground of old nation-states.

Under these conditions powerlessness can become complex and thereby contain the possibility of a politics, of making the political. I use this notion here to distinguish it from empowerment. Powerlessness can be complex even if there is empowerment.

Photography of thick, localized realities can capture a sort of globality constituted through recurrence rather than through the more common universalizing of meaning. It can show us that the spaces and times of our global modernity can contain thick immobilities. The long period of time that Salgado spent with the subjects of his diverse photographic projects is itself a concrete instance of these thick immobilities: he spent 15 months in Africa's Sahel region to work on the famine, six years documenting the lives and struggles of workers around the world, and eight years on the *Genesis* project<sup>5</sup>.

But can photography capture these novel kinds of nomadisms not predicated on geographic mobility. In my work I find it critical, both theoretically and politically, to dislodge mobility and globality from the entrapment of geographical movement; in today's world such movement is mostly marked as positive: those who are enabled to move geographically are the privileged, the achievers, the new



6 Cf. Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Right: From Medical to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press 2006, chapter 8.

7 Andreas Gursky (Los Angeles: Gagosian Gallery, March 4-May 1, 2010).

professionals, the famous artists, the powerful. The insufficiency of this automatic positive valence of mobility is especially clear when it becomes a logic for domination, as in the camps for displaced people, refugee flows, trafficking of migrant workers.

The challenge for both geography and photography is to capture these new meanings of immobility. How to capture the fact that those unable or unwilling to travel can nonetheless experience themselves as part of larger worlds marked by recurrence of meanings, struggles, imaginaries in multiple thick settings, each with its own specificities, across the world.

#### Geographies of expulsion

We can visualize masses driven out. But a geography of expulsions is much more than that.

With the onset of the global neo-liberal project in the 1980s, there are no more putative no-man lands beyond the nation-state, where we could export all bad things. There is the opposite project: an accelerated appropriation of what once may have been that no-man land. Mining and plantation agriculture have exploded well beyond what they may have been in the old imperial geographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 2006 to 2010 70 million hectares of land have been bought or leased by foreign governments and firms in Africa, Latin America, Central and East Asia. With such vast appropriation of land comes a sharp growth in the numbers of people who have been expelled – from villages, from smallholder agriculture. Many move to the cities of their regions.

These appropriations and their corresponding expulsions constitute new geographies. Can they be captured by photography? Certainly fragments of these geographies can. Can scale and space of vast dimensions be photographed? Is visibility a curve – up till a certain point we can relate to it as visibility, but beyond a certain scale and expanse, it is no longer a visual experience? For geography it would mean capturing a temporal dimension that functions as a fracture<sup>6</sup>.

In my new research project, I use the concept of logics of expulsion to describe a diversity of conditions: the growing numbers of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized and persecuted in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age, able-bodied surplus populations warehoused in ghettos and slums.

All of this can be conveyed by photography. The challenge is conveying scale and how quantity alters the meaning. Andreas Gursky finds a mode to convey scale through recurrence – row after row of basket weavers<sup>7</sup>. Salgado conveys scale through distance, as in his Sahel and in his Genesis photographs. Are there other modes?

#### Assemblages of presence

There is a kind of photography that gives us assemblages of presence. Presence is a complex condition that goes beyond the material, the visible. It is also ephemeral even when deeply material, because materiality by itself, and the visibility of the material, are not the same as presence. Presence is not a mere function or an attribute of materiality. Presence is made.

I immediately think of a city – which we might think of as a vast amplification of this possibility. Notwithstanding the enormity of its immobile physical structures, what marks the urban is the continuous slides and shifts – of meaning, of perspective, of materiality. Every person, every street, every window is a different vector into it all. The effect is that of a recovery of presence. And for me, this





RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG  
*Vertiginous Exhilaration*, 1995, C-print, 180 x 220 cm, framed.  
Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.



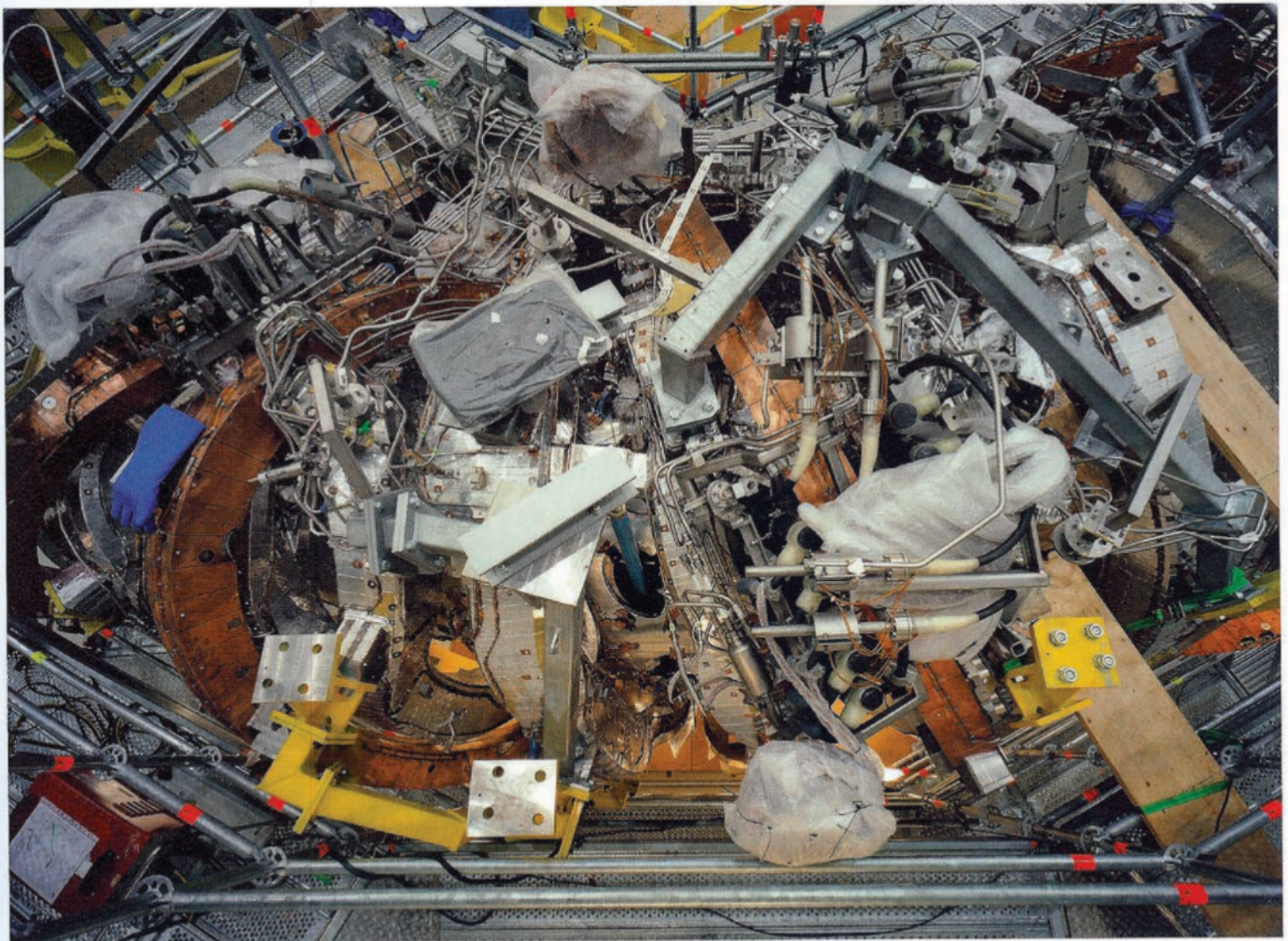


THOMAS STRUTH

*Semi Submersible Rig, DSME Shipyard, Geoje Island, 2007, C-print,  
270 x 340 cm. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.*

*Stellarator Wendelstein 7-X Detail, Max Planck IPP, Greifswald, 2009, C-Print,  
160 x 209,5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.*





8 "The Global Street: Beyond the Piazza and Theatrum Mundi?" (research project filed with author, Columbia University).

9 Stefen Gronert and Christoph Schreier, *Thomas Struth. Straßen. Fotografie 1976 bis 1995*. (Cologne: Kunstmuseum Bonn 1995); *Thomas Struth* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, May 5-June 19, 2010); *Thomas Struth: Photographs 1978-2010* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, July-September 2011).

10 *Commonsensual - the work of Rut Blees Luxemburg* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009).

experience of recovering presence is at the core of urbanity understood as a more global event than our western European notion of the urbanity of the piazza. It is more the urbanity of the Global Street<sup>8</sup>.

Standing in front of certain photographs, two concepts jump out: making and recurrence, which promptly take me to the question as to whether recurrence is made, and whether this formulation actually unsettles what the artist is after. This is a slippery zone. Meanings begin to slide even as they are only migrating across infinitesimal distances. I see this migration of meaning in Thomas Struth early photographs of buildings in urban space and the recent series on offshore rigs<sup>9</sup>. The multiplication of pieces of materiality in some photographs – Struth's recent photos of vast piles of elements, from tools to materials, on off-shore rigs – gives us an experience of intensity rather than of endless repetition. Also in the city, the active making of multiplication ironically unsettles the meaning of endless repetition – there is plenty of repetition in any city. And it is alive, no matter its seemingly inert materialities.

Rut Blees Luxemburg nighttime photography of familiar urban spaces devoid of people, makes these spaces unfamiliar.<sup>10</sup> In so doing the photograph brings to the fore the fact of an assemblage – the familiar elements are all there but their meanings migrate with the shift in light and the emptiness. We see the unfamiliar, a space where we can find the sublime.





RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG

*Oakwood*, 2006, C-print, 100 x 127cm framed. Courtesy Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, and the artist.

The artefacts of the quotidian we see in New York photographer Marilyn McLaren – glasses lying, not standing, on a table; the metal bars on a window from the Bronx with a view of a far away Manhattan's corporate centre – conjure up an assembling that is, again, more than the sum of the parts, and more than mere repetition. Something is extracted that was not visible: the objects say more than their facticity, and a space is rescued from the silence of absence.

Immobile images – as in photographs, or in much sculpture – can produce slightly sliding meanings, a sort of nomadism of meanings. They do so through the larger assemblage of presences that constitute them and that are more than the sum of the elements – the whole makes room for multiple vectors of meaning, visibility, and form. It makes room for the work of the crawling eye.

In my own work I have developed notions of "making presence", of rescuing from the silence of absence. I am especially interested in understanding how groups and events at risk of invisibility due to societal prejudices and fears become present to themselves, to others like themselves, and to others unlike themselves. What I seek to capture is a very specific feature. It is the possibility of making presence where there is silence and absence.

One version of this is a particular condition in even the densest city that has the visual character of under-utilized space, and is indeed often seen as such. Yet these spaces are often charged with memories, with presences of the past, rather than by their current meaning as under-utilized space. They are thus charged precisely



<sup>11</sup> See Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, op. cit.

because they are under-utilized. As memories, these spaces become part of the "interiority" of the city, the city's present, even when this interiority is outside the profit-driven utility logics and their spatial framings. They are the *terrains vague* or vacant grounds that enable many residents to connect with their city at a time of rapid changes. This is a making of presence.

#### Analytic Borderlands: Extracting a Space Where There is Meant to be None

For me as a political economist, addressing these issues has meant working in several systems of representation and constructing spaces of intersection". There are analytic moments when two systems of representation intersect. Such analytic moments are easily experienced as spaces of silence, of absence. One challenge is to see what happens in those spaces, what operations (analytic, of power, of meaning) take place there.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities can produce and make legible is not easily executed. Utility logics will not do. It calls for artists (e.g. public sculpture) and architects able to navigate multiple forms of knowledge and introduce the possibility of an architectural practice located in spaces – such as intersections of multiple transport and communication networks – where the naked eye or the engineer's imagination sees no shape and no possibility of a form, just pure infrastructure and utility.

What happens if we begin to think of this space as one that bridges two differences: it is a kind of frontier zone, an in-between space that is under-specified, ambiguous, under-narrated. One version of these in-between spaces is what I have called analytic borderlands. They are spaces constituted in terms of discontinuities, and usually conceived of as unrelated or disconnected. In constituting them as *analytic borderlands*, discontinuities are given a terrain rather than reduced to a dividing line. Much of my work on economic globalization and cities has focused on these discontinuities and has sought to reconstitute their articulation analytically as borderlands rather than as dividing lines. I see such analytic borderlands in much photography, including the few cases alluded to here.

There is an urban condition today that lies between the fact of massive structures and the existence of semi-abandoned places that I would so much like to see rendered photographically in ways that pull them out of their familiar and flattening concreteness. It is a condition not unique to today's period – under other arrangements, and with variable particularities, it also existed in the past. I think that this elusive in-between space is essential to the experience of urban living, and that it lends legibility to transitions and the uneasiness of specific spatial configurations. Aside from the huge range of contributions that are typically enumerated, architecture and urbanism can function as critical art practices that allow us to capture something far more elusive than that which is represented by all-present ideas/tropes such as, for example, the "transformation of the urban into a theme park".

The types of space I have in mind are the surfaces that cover recycling plants, tunnels and sewage systems; small awkward unused spaces that have been forgotten or do not fit the needs of utility-driven plans and hence are seen as useless; and other such spaces we do not recognize as spaces. We can also add spaces that require the work of detecting possible architectures where there now is merely a formal silence, a non-existence; for instance, a modest and genuinely undistinguished *terrain vague* – not a grand *terrain vague* that becomes magnificent through the scale of its decay and abandonment, as might be the case with an old unused industrial harbour or steel factory.

It is precisely in these spaces, easily experienced as dead, that there is a possibility: the possibility of inserting architectures and of formalizing them as inhabited infrastructures – the possibility of

Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Co-Chair of The Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University ([www.saskiasassen.com](http://www.saskiasassen.com)). Her new books are *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press, 2008) and *A Sociology of Globalization* (W.W.Norton 2007), both translated into French by Demopolis and Gallimard, respectively. Her books are translated into over twenty languages.

an architectural moment in what is seen as mere silences or gaps from the point of view of mainstream architecture. To recover infrastructures that facilitate daily life in the city, many of which deserve recognition, is to recover histories other than the history of building for users, for consumption. To transform the infrastructures for public use into sites for architectural and artistic interventions is not only to celebrate people's histories but also to give presence to everyday life.

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# Michelangelo Antonioni's plot development

DAVID COLLARD

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1967), the director's first film in English, was an international box-office success. It took a middle-aged Italian outsider to see swinging London clearly and to see it whole, at a time when, as now, the capital was going through extensive redevelopment and modernization. The lead character, an unnamed photographer played by David Hemmings, incarnates some of the period's values: he is shallow, selfish, impulsive and unreflective. He is also, still, the embodiment of mid-century urban cool.

The opening shot, seen behind the stylish credits, is

a high-angle view of an expanse of grass in what we later discover to be a suburban park. That Antonioni had the grass painted a particular shade of green to meet his requirements is significant because *Blow-Up* is as much about painting as it is about photography, and that first shot – which is repeated at the end of the film – is a cinematographic representation of a literal painted landscape.

A recent London screening of *Blow-Up* was introduced by the artist and photographer Rut Blee Luxembourg, Reader in Urban Aesthetics at The Royal College of Art. She began by considering what she sees as the lie at the heart of representation in any medium. Hemmings's character, she pointed out, is presented from the outset as an unreliable narrator, posing as a homeless man to gain access to a South London doss house where he photographs the homeless inmates, making images that would today be regarded as exploitative. We next see him at his studio, straddling and photographing the model Veruschka in a heartless simulacrum of love-making, then bullying a group of listless fashion models. Hemmings's character (never named, but called Thomas in the script) is hard to

pin down – he is talented and clearly successful, but without direction or political affiliation. Bored and impulsive, he appears to have no serious relationship even with his wife, who is mentioned in passing but never appears in the film.

In one sequence, Thomas drives his open-top Rolls Royce through the streets of Westminster, pausing for a moment to allow some anti-nuclear protesters to cross the road. We briefly glimpse, in the distance, a building which is today, by happy coincidence, the site of a permanent public artwork by Blees Luxemburg entitled “Silver Forest”.

Part of a recent redevelopment by Lynch Architects, the western façade of Westminster City Hall features large-scale images of silver birch trees taken by Blees Luxemburg in Beijing and London which, cast in glass-reinforced concrete, form a three-dimensional sculptural relief that is altered subtly as the light changes. Of this work the artist says:

The concept of the forest in the city is about a connection between nature and the urban. The forest introduces ideas about regeneration, finding refuge but also awe and trepidation. This *Silver Forest* is collected together from urban



forests, which are under intense strain, but somehow manage to survive.

A comparable link between nature and the urban is exemplified in several scenes in *Blow-Up* shot in Maryon Park in suburban south London, where Thomas takes photographs of a young woman (Vanessa Redgrave) with an older man who appears to be her lover. She angrily demands the negatives, and he refuses. When he develops the roll of film he is at first intrigued and then obsessed by what appears to be evidence of a murder. In a mesmerizing and justly celebrated sequence he makes a series of enlargements to establish what, if anything, happened in the park. A prompt to our understanding of the process comes earlier in the film, when an abstract Pollock-like painting by the photographer's artist friend is described as a "detective story" whose solution, if there is one, will only emerge when the picture is complete. Images are cryptic, conjectural and alluring – their meaning is contingent.

Blees Luxemburg particularly admires the ingenuity with which Antonioni uses the medium of painting to explore the function of photography. In one panel of her "Silver Forest" there is an apparently discarded sack, an example of what



Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* calls a *punctum* – something within the image that snags the attention of the viewer, perhaps not the ostensible subject (what Barthes calls the *studium*), but some irrelevant detail, the disruptive presence of which alters the nature of the image and, he says, “changes my reading, so that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value”. BleeLuxemburg uses the German word *tatort* (i.e. a place of action, or a crime scene) to describe the photographic image and that, literally, is what the blow-up in *Blow-Up* appears ambiguously to contain: evidence of a crime.

The photographic image was for Walter Benjamin the site where evidence might be found (although of a social rather than criminal/forensic kind). In his *Small History of Photography* (1931) he calls such evidence the “optical unconscious” of the image, which he defines as the “too much, the excess, the ‘real’ that creeps into the picture, unintended by the photographer”. Thomas locates and navigates the optical unconscious as he obsessively enlarges the images he took in the park, re-photographing them on a large-format camera, gradually revealing a figure in some bushes who appears to be holding a gun, and later what seems

to be a dead body. Paradoxically, the larger the blow-up becomes the less detail emerges, until we arrive at a seemingly random series of black and white blobs similar to the abstract painting seen earlier, at which point pictorial meaning breaks down and – perhaps – a solution is reached.

Released nearly half a century ago, *Blow-Up* remains fresh and urgent in both its theme and its treatment, adding depth to a period often celebrated by nostalgists for its most superficial qualities. Blees Luxemburg's striking large-scale images in Victoria, a recent addition to London's streetscape, are among the best public art currently on view in the capital, offering passers-by aesthetic consolation and an opportunity for spiritual contemplation. Speaking of "Silver Forest" Blees Luxemburg has said: "photography is open-ended and the narrative has to be completed by the viewer". She could equally be describing Antonioni's enigmatic masterpiece.

"Silver Forest" is at Kings Gate, 66-74 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6SQ

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## London Dust: new photographs and video by Rut Blees Luxemburg

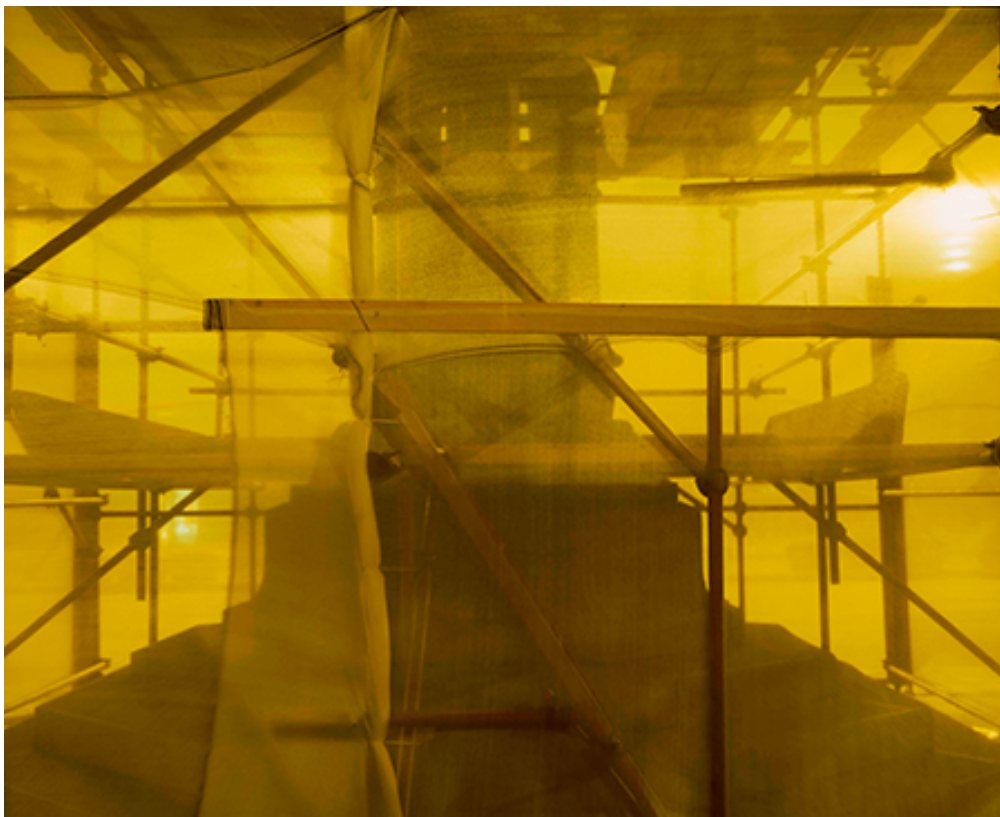
June 19, 2014 by Alexander García Düttmann and Jean-Luc Nancy



Rut Blees Luxemburg, *London Dust*, 2013, photographic print, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist, Dominique Fiat Gallery, Paris, chandelier projects, London

All these rounded buildings, all these buildings that curl upwards and form spirals, all these buildings that seem to be on the verge of taking off into a livid sky like a telescope waiting to be extended, all these swollen and bloated buildings, all these buildings with golden and silvery reflections, photographed as if they had already been erected, or as if they had already changed the city's three-dimensional skyline, all these buildings that assimilate themselves to the dome of a neighbouring cathedral, that appropriate it, and that belong as much to the future as to the past, all these buildings that photography has already stored away by carrying them through the arch of a depot, a large arch

made of bricks that surrounds itself with spikes, or that doubles its low curvature as if in search of protection – well, these buildings do not exist, as they say, not all of them. And that's precisely what Rut Blees Luxemburg's images show. Rather than appearing as buildings one could enter so as to circulate within their enclosed spaces, or rather than appearing as buildings one could climb so as to throw oneself into a new depression from the top, they appear as urban construction sites. Here, the city comes into sight as a place where something happens, or as something that takes place right now. Clearly it can exist only in and as photography. The city is a deceptive poster, a post card whose image hovers between the real and the imaginary, given facts and virtual projections, vulgarity and luxury, the modern and the old, the private and the public. That the city exists only in and as photography must be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, the finished city, recognisable as such because nothing proves out of place, the city as a museum of the past and the future, is the city of digital photography, of photography that knows how to put things right. Yet on the other hand, the city that is in the process of turning into what it will once have been, the city that is being built, the city that keeps growing, the city that falls into ruins and undoes itself, the city that eliminates, excludes and evicts, the city that is being abandoned, that abandons itself and flees, that escapes towards another city or something other than a city, the dusty city and the rotten city, the city that has become too expensive, is also the city of photography, for it must still be staged. What must be staged is the city's own staging, its construction site full of scaffoldings and yellow and green plastic sails, teeming with rubbish, with bags made of synthetics, with stuffed bags that form a dam, with bags that become humps of wet blackness, with white and empty bags that display the name of a supermarket chain. On both sides, it is always the misery of the city that is at stake. Photography exhibits the heart of the city as its misery, its petrification, its transformation into cardboard, and as its passion, its line of flight, its winter journey. One must show the work of architects, limpid and proper, sustained by huge Doric or Corinthian columns, and one must try to glimpse the undoing, or the unworking, that the work must call for if it is to come into its own, if it requires labour in order to be produced. Since the architect's project can only be realised if there is a site, a construction site, and a garbage container, there is no city that could renounce photography, that could do without a more or less accurate representation of what it will resemble one day, and that could bypass the unexpected presentation of what resists the project, of what is at work in the city and deconstructs it at the very moment it is being built. The coming city takes leave, and it is here, in this interruption of the project, that art finds its place, or that photography reveals the event of taking-place as a drifting, as a horizontal movement that constantly renews itself, that provides itself a new thrust by allying itself with a voice and encountering a few strangers. Photography reveals the event of taking-place as a tracking shot that wrests its force from the frozen image of a Greek vertical line and that passes along wooden fences, iron grids, and camps improvised in an open space.



Rut Blees Luxemburg, *London Dust*, 2013, photographic print, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist, Dominique Fiat Gallery, Paris, chandelier projects, London





Rut Blees Luxemburg, *London Dust*, 2013, photographic print, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist, Dominique Fiat Gallery, Paris, chandelier projects, London

The tracking shot wrests itself from the frozen image of a Greek colonnade. It travels, it journeys across the city in winter along with Schubert's bittersweet melody, in which the voyager sings that he came and will also leave a stranger. The journey goes nowhere. Having wrested itself from the photographed Greek colonnade, from a ludicrous advertising poster with a troop of recycling containers lined up in front of it, the journey ends after several stops or stations, several meditative or puzzled halts. It has reached a miserable and grey, hostile and futureless obstruction. The world is so 'trüb', the voyager sings, so grey, so drab, so murky, so disenchanting. The world is 'a much bigger mess', a mess much bigger than the mess of the camp, he may read as he comes across the tents set up by outraged protesters. And only a few steps further it says 'love is the answer', an echo of words sung by the voyager, 'das Mädchen sprach von Liebe'. The young girl has been glimpsed as she went by with her friend right in front of the recycling containers, while the poster of the Greek temple moved away into the background. Later the fluted and massive columns of the city's monuments will parade at the speed of a walk quickened by restlessness, just before we are led to dirty walls, nocturnal passers-by who are intrigued by the camera, and then on to the big shambles, a plastic bag next to a neo-Roman gate, a group of people waiting for a bus, and once again the lower parts of supposedly Doric or Ionic columns, shown repeatedly as if the repetition were the beat of the ambition to create a *polis*. The whole city becomes its own temple, lifted up by other and mimetic columns into the cathedral sky, by a spiral or a heavy cone or shell, by signs that gesture towards a sky overloaded with dusty steam and yellowish or blueish pollution. Only one image cuts through it all with its straightforward colours. It is

the image of a blue arch with a frieze made of bricks. All that can be seen through its wide gape is an intense blackness into which the beige floor disappears as it turns greenish. Why should I stay on if I am going to be expelled, the voyager asks, and he begins to look elsewhere, in darker places. The high fronts of buildings and the glimmering partition-walls of the construction sites are shot through with lights that shimmer excessively, as if they were trying to emit a radiance that no longer does any good since all that may be left inside is emptiness. Perhaps the *polis* and its temples no longer have an inside, just like the ruins of the Greek temple on the poster, and all we can do on the construction site is walk from ruin to ruin, while a tired worker wearing a boiler suit as orange as the surrounding lights leans on something. What is he thinking of? He may see the passing voyager, or he may not. Love loves to gallivant, the voyager sings, to turn itself into a ballad, it loves to go from one to another. It passes in front of wire fences, in front of 140 LONDON WALL written in big antique-style letters, and then continues to heavy concrete blocks that are not topped by columns. Good night, my gentle darling, the voyager says before he vanishes. He does not wish to disturb her, he simply wants to let her know that he has thought of her in the night of the city, in the vicinity of the columns and the shambles, the Greek skyscrapers, the colourless dome, and the torn sails displayed along the construction sites, tinted the colour of mimosas or periwinkles. The photo captures all these nuances, these streams of dirty beige, of grey, of rancid butter, of greyish-brown and bistre, of bitumen and cobalt, of steel, silver and putty, it captures all the vestiges and pulverescences, all the flakes on a hat, all the fluorescent flashes on a protective net, and also the dense chocolate of the river that features a gliding boat, a boat that is not used by voyagers but by tourists who are in town and want to gaze at the Greek ruins, tomorrow or way back, before or after the big city. Writing of lights, photography, rain of bright photons that emanate from the sullied marble and from the lemony attire of a black night watchman whose cigarette lights up suddenly with a magenta sparkle. There is misery, abandonment, and yet there is also the voyager's song, the pausing of the camera, a patient waiting for each image to lay itself down, a note or a touch placed like tender mist.



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Translated from French by Jared Stark and Alexander García Düttmann

*Rut Blees Luxemburg is an artist living in London, UK. Her work is included in the Liverpool Biennale, UK, which opens on 5 July. Her exhibition 'London Dust' was shown at Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, France, in 2013, and chandelier projects, London, earlier this year. A monograph on her work, Commonsensual, is published by Black Dog.*

## About the authors



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Alexander García Düttmann teaches philosophical aesthetics at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, Germany. His publications include *Participation* (2011) and *Naive Art. An Essay on Happiness* (2012).



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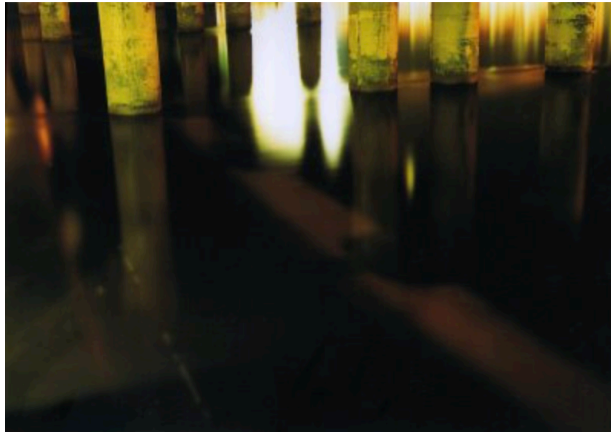
Jean-Luc Nancy taught philosophy at Marc Bloch University in Strasbourg, France, before he retired. His publications include *The Other Portrait* (2014) and *The Disavowed Community* (2014).



## Why Don't We Walk Along The River?

### Rut Blees Luxemburg and David Campany in conversation

David: It's Saturday night and we're at the foot of Hungerford Bridge in Central London. Rut, you are preparing an image of the underside of the bridge. You've made a small 35mm study which we have here, so we can see your image and the bridge itself. Was there an obvious way for you to make an image here? By that, I mean, do places strike you as images?



Rut: Well, this study already has a title which is *Die Ziehende Tiefe*. It took me a while to figure out the title which means *The Wandering Depth*. And *ziehende* also means pulling, so there is this play between 'wandering' and 'pulling', and that's exactly what I felt about the water here. It sort of pulls you, as well as moving along. And with this long light exposure you suddenly see something below the surface, and that is what I was interested in here. So, yes, there was an obvious way for me to shoot this scene.

David: Seeing the place for myself and your image of it – which is quite a transformation – leads me to think that you are able to see places in terms of how long exposure will render them. I guess this comes with experience. There is often a tension in your work between what is there and what is not there.

Rut: Yes – that is certainly an experience that guides my image making.

David: This seems partly a technical matter to do with long exposure – some things are rendered crisp, others disappear – but it is also to do with how people see at night, or don't see. The long exposure is a look at something, but it is also a look at what is usually passed over by people in the city at night.

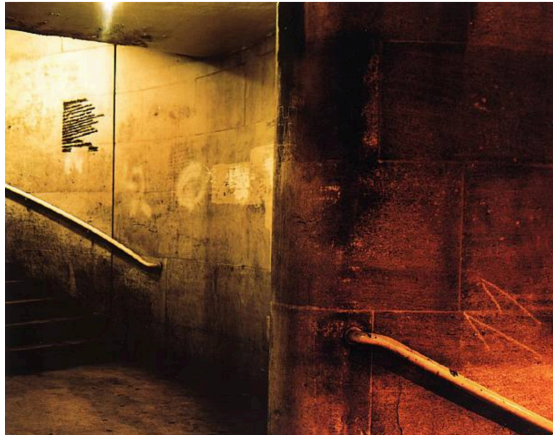
Rut: For me, that is the pleasure within my practice – that the camera allows what you called a transformation. Something other than what you can see during your mundane, everyday experience of the city can emerge. Something which is there, but which can be sensed better than it can be seen. The camera allows this to be unveiled or shown. In this photograph I had to work out the schedules of the river, the tides. When the tide is low, another hidden layer emerges.

David: Do you always make 35mm studies first before moving to a large format camera?

Rut: Yes – not always, but mostly.

David: This quite interesting in the sense of your relation to the site or location. It means that when you come to actually make the final image, it's already a return to the site. You are going back.

Rut: I don't think of it as a return. The moment of making the study is more of a pre-moment and the real moment comes when I make the large-scale exposure. Why don't we walk along the river? I have made an image called *Liebeslied* or *Love Poem* about a quarter of a mile further down.



David: We are at the foot of Waterloo Bridge looking at a flight of steps you photographed in ...?

Rut: 1997.

David: It's changed since then. The text that appears on the wall in your image – a text that looks like a poem that has been crossed out or covered over – has almost disappeared. What first drew you to this site?



Rut: *Liebeslied* has become the overall title for a body of work and for my second book. For me the *Liebeslied* was this elusive writing on the wall which seemed always more than just graffiti or some quick communication. Even when I first saw it, it was indecipherable. I think that the writer tried to eradicate it, just after writing it. And now it has become a stain or trace, adding to all the other stains on the surface of the city. I like the curves, they are so baroque that they suggest something much more palatial, or sacred, instead of a cold, outdoor space.

David: It looks like a very private form of communication, the opposite of most graffiti or street writing which might tend to be a disenfranchised citizen announcing something to the world in general. The poem seems like one soul speaking to another soul but within a public place.

Rut: Yes, that's why for me it became a *Liebeslied*. It is very considered. The scale is intimate. It is writing at the scale of the body.

David: Which is also the scale of the page.

Rut: So I came and photographed it. It seems private. I'm attracted to the *Heimlichkeit* of a space in public. A space that allows for a moment of repose.

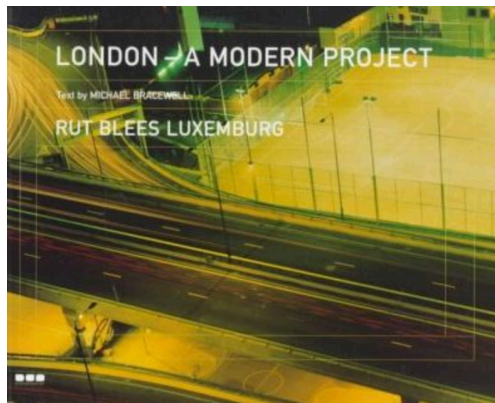
David: Do you think that repose comes from the places or from your images?

Rut: From the places, most definitely. It is hard for me to photograph places where I don't have that feeling or relation. The images then try to trace that sensibility.

David: I think of your work as almost the opposite of street photography which we associate with bright daylight, people, grabbed chance instants and speed, instantaneity. Here we have long duration, emptiness, a shell that becomes a content, rather than the other way around where in street photography people become generalized ciphers of the masses. In your work the population is either moving through – coming or going – or absent.

Rut: Well the 5 x 4 camera is the opposite of what the street photographer would use. It requires slowness and concentration and the exposures are long. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. So it's another kind of street photography. Or maybe 'street' isn't even important. 'Public' photography is better.

David: Your photographs are often of streets or contain streets.



Rut: Well in the newer work the street is becoming less significant for me. In my earlier work, collected in the book *London: A Modern Project*, the street was much more important. Now it's other places.

David: There is generally much more intimacy in your recent work. You have moved away from the great heights and the monumentality of the built city.

Rut: That's a deliberate move. The idea of the *Liebeslied* suggests that intimacy of communication. An attention to another experience of the public. Not the great, grand declamation but the small theatrical spaces and gestures. Shall we go further along the river?

David: OK, we're at the site of a picture called ...?

Rut: *Nach Innen* or *In Deeper*.



David: The title seems to refer back to a quote by Roland Barthes that Michael Bracewell used in the introduction to your first book, if I recall .

Rut: Yes, yes: "To get out, go in deeper." It became the motto for this newer work, in a way. Deeper, closer to the ground.

David: You can't get much closer to the ground than the water, or sea level.

Rut: Well the interesting thing about the sea level is that it moves, as we saw, it changes within a couple of hours.

David: This suggests interesting questions of duration and long exposure and the subtleties of changes. I'm reminded of a great little essay by Jeff Wall called 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence'. He's talking mainly of how the instantaneous picture can show forms that are unavailable to human vision, but I think the long exposure of moving water does something equally specific to photography. This soupy, syrupy quality.

Rut: And here a very golden quality to water as it is lit. This image is also very much about absence. You see the footsteps on the mud? They are expressive of something that runs right through the *Liebeslied* series, which became about a possible poet who is wandering the city in a way that is in contrast to the *flâneur* made famous by Baudelaire. The *flâneur's* relation to the city is very much about a pleasure or diversion. The poet's wandering is more about an encounter.

David: I remember in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, James Stewart asks if he can accompany the wandering Kim Novak. She replies that only one person can wander, two are always going somewhere.

Rut: I think that's true. I do walk alone although occasionally when I come to shoot on large format I'll take an assistant, but by that stage the wandering has been done.

David: There has been a lot of recent discussion about the *flâneur* and the contemporary city, partly as a response to new forms of spectacle, and partly, for political reasons to open up the city and break the alienated, uncreative habits into which city dwellers fall or are coerced. But the wandering of the poet is far more contemplative, it seems. Perhaps more difficult or painful.

Rut: I wouldn't call it difficult. It's a different daring. To dare to have this encounter, which might be an encounter with the self, or with what goes beyond the experience or appearances. It looks deeper to levels of experience beneath. In that way it can be much more political than the *flâneur* whose distraction fits in so well with the city's diversions.

David: The more recent work is spatially more intimate. It is also slightly more mute. Of course all photography is mute, but your previous work conjured up sounds of passing cars or anxious voices.

Rut: The newer work is not mute. You just have to listen more carefully. Its just not as loud.

David: The American photographer Robert Adams once said "Still photographs often differ from life more by their silence than by the immobility of their subjects. Landscape pictures tend to converge with life however on summer nights when the sounds outside, after we call the children in and close the garage doors, are the small whirr of moths and the snap of a stick."

Rut: Hmmm ...

David: Obviously there's a sort of American rural romanticism in there, but the idea of a picture taken of a silent world is perhaps more realistic than a photograph that shuts off noise. The silence of photography is consonant with a silent world.

Rut: I'm not sure. That's debatable. But within my work of course it's all taken at night, which has a very different level of silence or noise.

David: It's a John Cage-like idea that the quieter things are the more significant the sound. This would run counter to Adams. Do you want to say something about the significance of the river coming up again and again in this new work?

Rut: Hölderlin had some interesting ideas about the river. The river is this wonderful moving entity, which combines places and joins them up together and brings them to the sea. Hölderlin understood the river in a relationship to the sky, through the reflection of the sky in the water joining the two different elements together. For him the river was almost a receptacle of the gods. Do the gods come down through reflection and the rain?

David: Water at night is a very powerful image.



Rut: It suggests an immersion. In my past work I was very much interested in vertiginous sensations. In this work I am much more interested in the sensation of immersion. Of course the river reflects... so it has this curious relation to photography. Water appears in another image called *Feuchte Blätter* or *Moist Sheets*. In German the word has a double meaning again. *Blätter* means leaves on a tree but also sheets, perhaps waiting for the text.

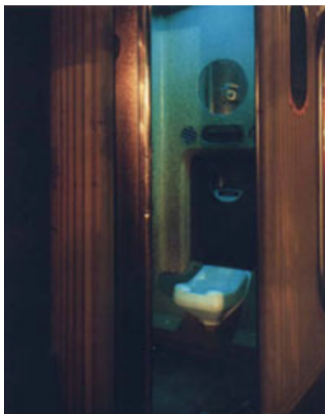
David: You have found nature in the city.

Rut: In my new work nature dictates a lot of the photographs. I have to wait for rains or tides.

David: This is a big break from the permanences of the world of concrete and steel that characterized *London: a Modern Project*. The newer work is more intimate. It welcomes nature and looks to the ephemeral.

Rut: Well the ephemeral did surface in *A Modern Project*, usually in the lights on buildings that would go on and off according to people moving around.

David: Now then, you've brought me to a rather swish but smelly public toilet. We've paid twenty pence and now we've entered one of the city's more intimate spaces! You've made an image of a very similar space.



Rut: Yes. The image is called *Orpheus' Nachtspaziergang* or *Orpheus' Nocturnal Walk*. This isn't an ordinary toilet. It's one of these modern generic city toilets, a capsule. I think as an image it is very lush, which I like. These toilets have never been successful. No-one dares to use them. I don't use them! But I like the privacy they offer within the city. In a very public situation you suddenly have this incredible privacy.

David: And the marbles and metals of this interior are so similar to the cafés springing up all over the city.



Rut: Absolutely. But it feels strange. I like the beautiful round mirror. I shot it from the outside glimpsing the inside, from the position of a walker. And as Nietzsche said “Only the thoughts formed during motion are worthwhile.”

David: Let’s return to this idea of the walking poet in contrast to the *flâneur*. For Hölderlin, or the poet, walking involves responding to the world around them while being wrapped up in, or preoccupied with, other thoughts.

Rut: In a way, the motion of walking induces a certain state of mind. It’s not dreamlike, but it is almost meditative. So shall we walk a bit further?

David: We are looking down at a tennis court you turned into a photograph titled *Corporate Leisure*.



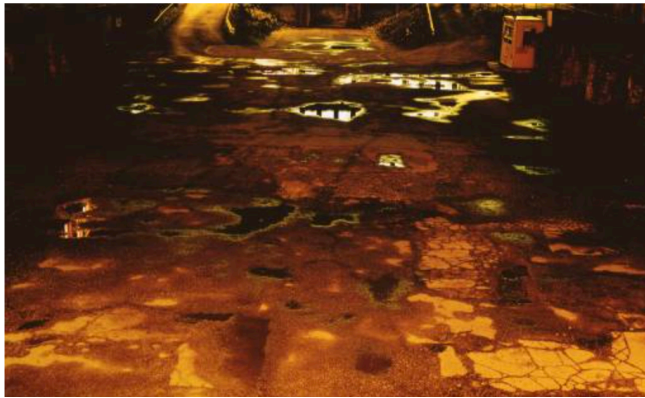
Rut: The tennis court is on top of a building owned by de Beers, the diamond merchants.

David: It’s in one of those courtyard spaces that exist around the back of the impenetrable looking facades of so many big London buildings. How did you come to be here?

Rut: I think the impenetrability of the city is more of an illusion than a reality. You can actually find access to these places and enter them. This has been very important for my work – penetrating sites that at first suggest inaccessibility. What is so frightening about these places is the future they suggest – the fortress and the control that emanates from it. But I think they can be entered.

David: The glass facade of the city is not so much transparent as it is reflective, bouncing back the gaze and reflecting the city around it. It offers itself as a spectacle of power that precludes entry, but as you point out, by bringing me here, the city isn’t quite as impenetrable as it seems. How do you feel about the surveillance cameras? From where we are here I can count about seven or eight.

Rut: Well, as you’ve seen the cameras are not as effective as they suggest. They didn’t pick us up. This is the attitude one can develop in relation to surveillance. It is more a myth than a reality. If the urban dwellers let the surveillance camera dictate movement around the city, they might as well stay at home.



David: We've arrived at what looks like a shallow excavation site. I guess a building once stood here but now it is being used temporarily as a car park. You made an image here called *Das Offene Schauen* or *Viewing the Open*. It is a cinematic image, something like an establishing shot. Frame shape varies a good deal across your work. Does the cropping come afterwards or at the act of taking?

Rut: It varies, as the image requires. This place felt something like a Western in a way, with a swooping panoramic expanse. A vista.

David: Questions about the medium of photography and related technical matters have surfaced already in our conversation. Now, I have this sense that the serious amateur, in coming to grips with the medium, encounters the long exposure as probably the first 'trick', the first magical bit of photography, where the camera itself is helping to produce an estranging effect. It is giving a kind of duration that is longer than normal, producing its own forms in the image. And on that level there is something about all long exposure night photography that contains something of the fascination that the serious amateur has with the camera itself.

Rut: Well for me it's not so much a fascination with photography but a fascination with the possibilities of the large format camera and the long exposure which allows me to let chance enter the work. The long exposure leaves space for unexpected things to happen while the shutter is open. So contingency is a big part of my way of taking images, of letting in that which is outside of my control.

David: This is an interesting way to use a large format camera, which we usually associate with the height of control and pre-meditation.

Rut: The serious amateur would be horrified by certain results I get in terms of colour balances and uncorrected perspectives.

David: There is always something in your work about on the one hand being very controlled but on the other letting chance happen within that control. This is somehow quite similar to your overall strategy of walking through the city at night and seeing what happens. It is a framework in which new possibilities can arise.

Rut: I set my own constraints, but they are open for whatever can happen.

David: The street photographer whom we mentioned earlier has historically shot an awful lot of image, and probably a lot of awful images, to get what they want. You don't work this way.



Rut: No. I edit before I shoot which means I take a very deliberate number of photographs. The consideration and the chance come before taking the image and during the image but not afterwards. For me it is much more interesting to concentrate on less, and perhaps in one image enough happens to keep you engaged for a longer period instead of moving onto other images.

David: That means you have an output that parallels a painter more than a photographer. And you also make preliminary studies, which is quite a painterly activity, as a way of preparing or pre-editing before committing to the time and expense of a big image. Are there many images that don't make it to the final stage?

Rut: Yes. Not many but there are a few. But sometimes I go back to them and think about them again.

David: Could you talk a little about titles of your photographs?

Rut: The titles open up the work for another reading. These other readings are often literary, or mythical or allegorical.



David: Again this is more like a painter than a photographer. Let's take an image like *Mount Pleasant*, a beautiful image of some rather savage metal fence work running along a high wall.

Rut: It was taken in Mount Pleasant, but the name is also evocative of another sensation. In the *Liebeslied* images I've gone back to German. Not intentionally, but somehow it came over me to use them, because often the German words have the quality of being equivocal, and in translation a gap opens and another layer of meaning becomes possible.

David: This plays against how mass culture puts image and text together to clarify, to contain what Allan Sekula once called the "fragmentary, incomplete utterance" of the photograph.

Rut: Yes, but my titling is not an obscure act. It is something which opens up something else.

David: Would you want to say something about the erotics of the work?

Rut: No. I leave that to the interpreter.

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Rut Blees Luxemburg and David Campany, 1999. This conversation has been published several times, notably in David Evans' fine anthology *Critical Dictionary* (Black Dog Books, 2011), and in David Campany's *Art and Photography*.