



Ndlovini, Khayelitsha, Cape Flats. 2007

Encounters at the Edge



David Lurie was born in Cape Town. He studied economics, politics and philosophy and taught philosophy at the University of Cape Town. From 1980 to 1985 he undertook research in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics, and co-edited *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, after which he worked as a consultant-economist in London. A self-taught photographer, he began doing documentary projects part-time in 1990 and full-time in 1995. He is represented by Heidi Erdmann – Erdmann Contemporary / Photographers Gallery ZA.



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The images for this exhibition are from David Lurie's forthcoming book, to be published by Fourth Wall Publishing in 2013.

According to the United Nations, the majority of the world's population today live in cities. Out of a world population of 7 billion, 1 billion people live in slums and more than 1 billion are informal workers, struggling to survive. These figures are staggering if you consider that 95% of the future growth of humanity will occur in cities, overwhelmingly in poor cities, and most of it in slums. This creates a crisis for this global urban, informal working class, or mass unemployed people – especially, but not only, in the developing world – who have no formal connection to the world economy, and no chance of ever having such a connection. Inexorable forces are expelling people from rural areas, most of who migrate to urban slums on the peripheries of cities.

Mass movement from countryside to cities is not new. What is new – aside from the sheer magnitude of this movement – is how it is driven not by industrialisation or even economic growth but by sheer desperation. Recent studies (for example, *The Challenge of Slums* by UN-Habitat and *Planet of Slums* by Mike Davis) have alerted us to the fact that the global urban unemployment crisis is as serious a threat as climate change to our collective future. They have sounded an authoritative warning about the worldwide catastrophe of urban poverty. The informal proletariat constitutes



Khayelitsha, Site B. 2007

the fastest-growing social class on earth – the truly ‘excluded’. This phenomenon, which has been driven by neo-liberal economic policies and a thoroughgoing retreat of the state, clearly deserves more attention than it is getting from urban planners, sociologists, environmentalists, epidemiologists and demographers.

Cape Town mirrors many of the problems facing other African cities and cities in the developing world. How does this surplus humanity improvise survival in the city? These photographs are an attempt to distil my experience of these fragments of life – of unfinished stories – on the precipice beyond the edge of Cape Town. It is a study in informal survival, in a world of unstable, sprawling squatter camps, “informal settlements”, garbage hills, and the sand dunes of the Cape Flats, (and more recently, for me, in Hout Bay where I now live) where urbanisation has been disconnected from industrialisation and even from economic growth.

These photographs portray a vast humanity living on the edge of Cape Town. I focus on the excluded,

warehoused in shantytowns and exiled from the formal world economy, a habitat largely constructed out of crude brick, recycled plastic, metal sheets, cardboard, cement blocks, and scrap wood – surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay. The photographs attempt to capture the variety of responses to this environment.

The future evolution of slums or ‘informality’ needs to be determined by political and a variety of other interventions on the ground, rather than by uncontrollable economic and political forces. These issues, if left unaddressed, will not just wither away, but will go instead in search of more radical answers. Are these urban slums volcanoes waiting to erupt?

As unappealing as this might be to public taste this is nevertheless the way I see these issues. “*No [artist, photographer] is ethically excused from their own circumstances. We are all participants in our own time and place and cannot retreat from it.*” [Tony Judt, *Thinking the 20th Century*]



Khayelitsha, Site B. 2007



Blue Waters Refugee Camp, Strandfontein. 2009



New arrival, Imizamo Yethu, Hout Bay. 2007



Imizamo Yethu, Hout Bay. 2012



Imizamo Yethu, shackowner. 2012



Bungalows, Hangberg, Hout Bay. 2012