The Urban Photography Summer School at Goldsmiths, University of London: A Discussion and Photo Essay on Urban Rhythm

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This article consists of two parts. The first part is a discussion of the annual international Urban Photography Summer School, organized by Goldsmiths, University of London. This testimony is based on the author's participation in the latest edition of this two-week event. The discussion is interesting to bring this course under attention and can be relevant for future candidates. Two main points of general interest are focused on: (1) the relationship between aesthetics and research value in photography, and (2) the relationship between text and image. The second part of the article is a photo essay with the author's own final visual project that was produced and presented during the summer school. The images explicitly link back to the more epistemological questions in the first part. The essay deploys street photography to observe performativity and human behavior as it is structured by or opposed to the rhythms that create a city. Therefore, it refers to sociologist Henri Lefebvre's approach of rhythmanalysis.

Keywords: Urban Photography, Street Photography, Visual sociology, Photo Essay, Rhythm

1. Discussion

Last summer, I participated in the annual international Urban Photography Summer School (iUPSS) organized by Goldsmiths, University of London. This article is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion of the summer school. There, I want to reflect on the epistemological challenges and concerns of general interest that were raised. Two main points are focused on. The first one is the relationship between the aesthetic merit and the research value of an image. The other point is the question of how images can speak for themselves or what the necessity is of spoken or written words, especially in a research context. The first part of the article is necessary to sketch out the context in which the photo essay, presented in the second part, was produced. The photo es-

say is my own final visual project as a participant of the summer school. In other words, the article's second part is the output of the first part. The visual essay is a street photography project on the rhythms of the city and the performativity of our behavior in that urban public space. The photo essay also includes a meta-layer that explicitly links back to my personal, more medium-specific questions raised in the first part. By doing so, this article functions as a testimony of my own practical and concrete questions and insights resulting from an intense two weeks of thinking about photography as a visual form of urban inquiry and applying it in that manner.

For the third year in a row, the summer school (3–15 September 2012) offered a platform for the exploration of photography as a visual method. It is a stand-alone course, but connected with Goldsmiths' MA in Photography and Urban Cultures. The event plans to expand the number of participants over the next year. This can be seen as a sign of the gradually rising academic interest in, and concern for the visual in social sciences.

The summer school was divided into three modules: 'Urban Landscape', 'Objects' and 'Street Photography'. During the first week, each of the three was addressed in a number of theoretical contributions. Each topic was related to a practical photography assignment. The second week focused on the

participants' self-directed visual projects, finalized in a group exhibition. The module on street photography was my main motivation to participate. Street photography is the topic of my PhD project at the University of Antwerp under the supervision of visual sociologist Luc Pauwels. As I am a research and teaching assistant, the project is funded by this institution. The current title of the project, which also summarizes it, is: 'Street photography: (Re)conceptualizing the Field and an Exploration of Street Imagery as a Distinct Visual Sociological Source.' By attending the summer school, I wanted to gain the skills and experience to integrate a visual, practice-based part into my PhD with researcher-generated (street) photography. Despite the revival of street photography during the last decade, such an academic initiative on urban and street photography is quite unique (commercial public street photography workshops, however, are booming). Over the years, Goldsmiths' Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR), which organizes this summer school, has proved itself as one of the leading voices on urban and street photography, visual sociology and visual urbanism. Besides this summer school and their aforementioned MA, their members also founded the new International Association of Visual Urbanists (iAVU) and organize the annual Urban Encounters event and this year's conference of the

International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA).

The group of 14 participants was composed of diverse nationalities (coming from Scotland, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Romania, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and the United States). Half of the people attending were doing a PhD in fields as diverse as design, social geography, (visual) sociology, communication studies and architecture. Others were coming from teaching, film or art backgrounds. Therefore, the input of the participants was interdisciplinary, just as the programme's approach explicitly intended. At the beginning of the course, it was said that there's no such thing as an expert of photography; it's an interdisciplinary thing. This relates to an idea we returned to a number of times during the course: photography critic Bill Jay's (1992, 10) description of the image as slippery. The different meanings of a photograph can often 'slide off' in all directions, provoking 'meanderings into geography, psychology, politics, biography, sociology, popular culture, art history, science, morality and a myriad of other connected fields' (Jay 1992, 10). This brings me to a number of tensions that participants struggled with during the summer school: the boundaries between the artistic, the aesthetic and the (research) (con)text. These will return in the visual essay later on.

Photography as Artistic and/or Research Practice

On the website, the summer school was announced with the statement that: 'the programme will explore how the practice of urban image making informs the development of a reflexive and critical *research* perspective'[1]. Although, 'designed for photographers, artists and ethnographers', with the 'objective to facilitate a link between visual practice and urban theory/research', the programme leaned mostly towards photography as an aesthetic practice.

Off course, we worked within a number of 'constraints': for the one-week project and especially the three single day assignments, we didn't have time to do in-depth background research on parts of a city most of us didn't know that well. Within those timeframes, we had to come up with three good images for each small assignment and six to ten for the final visual project.

The stretch became most clear in an (optional) portfolio workshop by professional photographer Laura Cuch with advice on how to make a living out of our photography. The different intentions also became present in the lectures by photographers Marco Bohr and Mandy Lee Jandrell, which were organized in the Urban Landscape module. If Jandrell's approach comes across as theoretically preconceived and conceptually planned, then Bohr contested of the difficulty to pre-

conceive a project before going to places. The former approach could be described as 'research-led' and the latter as 'flâneur-based'[2]. These two terms derive from our general discussions with Paul Halliday during the summer school. They can be linked to the question of image-making as research method versus aesthetic or artistic practice. While the research-led photographer would have a research plan ready and develops a series of photographs to support or supplement it, the flâneur-based approach lets the questions rise out of the observations, impressions and the material, when exploring certain places in a photographic manner. Of course, these are relative rather than strict categories that can overlap at certain points in the process. The examples make these approaches more clear.

Jandrell uses photography to critically reflect on landscape, urbanism and our cultural perceptions. The four projects she presented were very much based on theoretical grounds (e.g. Urry 1990; Ryan 1997). Always on the borders between fake and real, and following W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, 5), she photographically explores how (urban) 'landscape is not a genre of art but a medium'. This means that a landscape can be read as expressing social or cultural values and power relations, instead of approaching it as an object. The German photographer Marco Bohr also presented

four projects, mostly concerned with the use of space. His different approach became most clear in his series 'No Ball Games' (2003) and 'Right of Way' (2011). It was only after visiting the housing estate Sidehill in Edinburgh almost daily for half a year that the focus of his series became the way children interact with the space. 'Right of Way' arose out of a residence in Canberra, where he was confronted with pedestrians' use of space in this city designed for cars. Furthermore, the talk and work of visual sociologist Caroline Knowles (discussed in point two) can be deemed a researcher-led approach, while Peter Coles and Paul Halliday in their 'object' and 'street photography' session testified to how a project only got assembled or delineated out of single images after years of dwelling on Paris and London streets, respectively.

In the module on street photography, we discussed with Paul Halliday how contemporary (British) street photography is missing a 'research' perspective or critical depth and mainly relies on an aesthetic effect that is most of the time either funny or foreign (meaning unusual, surreal). In his introductory session 'Re-thinking Street Photography', Halliday even hesitated to use the badly defined and misunderstood term and rather speaks of 'street-based' photography as a more open and inclusive category. Indeed, the whole idea that the street photographer can just observe (connected

with the objectivity of social sciences) and not interfere with the street came across as highly problematic in our sessions. In our street assignment, interaction with the people that we photographed was allowed, and awareness of our own role as a photographer was stimulated. The statement was made that street photography today is missing essential and deeply political voices, i.e. street photography that reaches out of the aesthetic play within the boundaries of the frame to critically deal with 'the bigger picture' of the social issues at stake. As an example, we returned to the engaged body of street photography of Markèta Luskacovà a number of times during the summer school. Luskacovà is a Czech photographer, living and working in London. In a long-term project of over thirty years, she documented the street markets and the people of Brick Lane and Spitalfields. In an essay on Luskacovà, touching on several issues also raised in this article, photographer and writer Gerry Badger (2000) describes that, 'the primary tenor of her work is [humanity], the everyday business of how people live and interact with each other, how they face the livelong day and get on with the often painful process of ordering their lives.' Luskacovà is particularly engaged with traditions, values, communities and ways of life that are under threat within society. However, until recently she was ignored by the art institutions. She applies her social

sciences background in a photographic manner rather than through *textual* academic analysis.

The Relationship Between Images and Text

A second 'constraint' was that we showed our own series of images to the group in a short oral presentation, i.e. without text. A central question that occupied many participants was: can images (taken with a critical research perspective) talk for themselves? For example, in her book on visual methodologies, geographer Gillian Rose (2006, 249) expresses her 'conviction that images only make sense [and only effectively carry an argument] in a wider context that will always include written text.' Indeed, the test for some participants to not give a verbal explanation and just show their pictures, proved problematic. The summer school's two bookend sessions are exemplary here.

On the one hand, Les Back, professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths and an authority in visual ethnographic research, in a very engaging introductory session, talked about sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu conducted extensive fieldwork in Algeria in the midst of the colonial war. Yet, he decided *not* to include the photographs he took there, originally more than 2500, in his writings on the period. Vice versa, in the last presentation, Caroline Knowles, a visual sociologist and author on visual methods (2004),

but not an image-maker herself, discussed the added value of why she works with a photographer on her projects. So, in the first case we dealt with a scientific text deliberately excluding images and in the second case, one with consciously integrated images. Moreover, the big photographic archive of Bourdieu, nevertheless an accomplished photographer and writer of a book on photography himself, was only exhibited towards the end of his life. What is interesting is that this time they were shown as solo images, without the direct context. By way of this case study, Back posed the why-question regarding integrating visual methodology into our research. If in the 19th century (photo) graphic images were still used by social researchers like Henry Mayhew (or Black photographer Thomas Askew's collaboration with sociologist W.E.B. DuBois; an example Knowles provided in her talk), then by the mid-20th century, sociology had become a discipline of words. Although Bourdieu might have felt he would have betrayed his subject by including his photographs, Back's (2009) close readings and contextualization of some of the images shine a light on Bourdieu's pictures as a form of fragmentary, alternative history against the grain. Furthermore, Back argued that photography can be valuable as a means of accessing insights and slippages that are beyond the photographer-annex researcher's un-

derstanding or appreciation.

The second case – Knowles' closing session on consciously combining text and image – was the most research-oriented one in a classic sense. The great merit of her talk was that it summed up some of the key concerns that had emerged during the summer school. Yet, the participants could have benefited even more from it for their own visual projects had it been programmed before everyone had finished their final works. Knowles collaborates with a separate photographer. By presenting some of her past and present projects – the current one, following one pair of flips-flops through the whole chain from material over-consumption to waste problem, was a welcome addition as a special object-based project – she discussed how she negotiates between what part of the story the images can tell and what parts we need words for. With concrete examples, she tried to show how photography works in another register, relating to the unspeakable, the unspoken (often so routine, so obvious that no one notices). The most dull visual sociology is the one describing what is in the pictures, she argued. Vice versa, in his book on visual methodology, visual anthropologist Marcus Banks (2001, 144) has called images that simply illustrate some aspects of the research project a 'largely redundant visual representation of something already described in the text.' Knowles eloquently reminded

us that we use visual methodologies to get 'a more fine-grained picture'.

2. Photo essay

The images presented here are all part of my own final visual project, produced and presented during the summer school. This second part of the article is not only the visual output of what is discussed in the first part, but also it tries explicitly to integrate the tensions and questions reflected upon further above as a meta-theme in my images. The general research focus underlying the essay is the performativity of human behavior in London's public space[3]. A further overarching element of the series is the (dis)connection by eye contact. This motif reaches out of the pictures towards you, the viewers, in that the images try to actively play with the beholder's hunger for story or fiction. This intention assimilates one of the struggles during the summer school: to present our series of photographs, not only with a loosely unifying theme, but essentially with a critical narrative resulting from a clear research perspective. Like visual sociologist Pauwels (2012) contends regarding the specific expectations of the visual essay as a social science format, '[it] clearly needs to be grounded in social science and from that basis try to impart insight about the social and cultural world.' The theoretical foundation of this essay is sociologist Henri Lefebvre's (1901–1991) approach of rhythmanalysis, which

was posthumously published in 1992. Lefebvre's premise is that 'everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm' (Lefebvre 2004, 15). Key in rhythmanalysis is the study of everyday life in urban spaces, which is made up of diverse rhythms.

I believe that the concept of rhythmanalysis can be linked with street photography, which is the practice that is adopted for this essay. Indeed, the core of street photography is the attention for everyday life in urban public space. Although Lefebvre (2004, 36) was convinced that 'no camera, no image or series of images can show these rhythms', I follow human geographer Paul Simpson (2012, 425), who

agree[s] that an image or series of images cannot necessarily fully capture or evoke such rhythms and their qualities, [but] a series of images can be useful in rhythmanalysis and provide techniques for thinking through the rhythms of urban life.

None of the street photographs in this photo essay are staged or manipulated. Finally, street photography shares an interest in often quotidian happenings that without capturing them would otherwise go by unnoticed. The political tenor of rhythmanalysis is present in the awareness that even the most intimate elements of everyday life are

bound up with the order of the omnipresent State and the political power that 'rhythms' individuals, groups and whole societies. Rhythms are usually taken for granted, but they become clearer with their breakdown. In most of the pictures, there is a conflict or dissonance between two or more rhythms: what Lefebvre (2004, 16) terms 'arrhythmia'. Rhythmanalysis has a political use as part of his critique of everyday life to expose, radically question and change the capitalist inscription of space and time on our biological and social rhythms.

The crux of rhythmanalysis for the Marxist philosopher Lefebvre was to investigate how citizens oppose the structuring rhythms of the state and capital by a particular use of time, or in the way they occupy spaces (Lefebvre 2004, 96). In the first picture, the small individuals march to the beat of the City on the Millennium Bridge. Damien Hirst's £1m sculpture – rhythmically titled *Hymn* – had been tagged by the Occupy movement in April 2012. The couple appropriates the space in a non-political, but intimate way. Time seems to stand still there. For Lefebvre, hu-

mans are produced both by 'natural' rhythms of respiration and the heart and the 'social' rhythms of contemporary cultural processes. For him, these rhythms converge on the body, in 'the everyday' (Horton 2005, 159). Furthermore, for me the image reflects the discussed relationship between a single image's mere artistic merit and the transparency of the social research value. The metropolis seems to rise out of the guts of the overlooking human body; to what extent does an artistic representation (i.e. photography) incorporate life, or when does the aesthetic dominate and not only frame, but strip the social reality perceived and intended by the visual researcher? A meta-dichotomy between mimesis (the 'bare' reproduction of reality) and expression (the subjective choices that flesh out an image) can be seen in the doll, the inevitable two parts of the picture. The following contemplation of the French critic Roland Barthes (2000, 5) seems to reflect on both this aspect and the picture's content:

It is as if the photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet [or Damien Hirst?, RD]) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus.

The picture has a similar lovely and macabre atmosphere at the same time. The art work of a human referent overlooks the different rhythms between the entangled pair of lovers versus the stream of people.
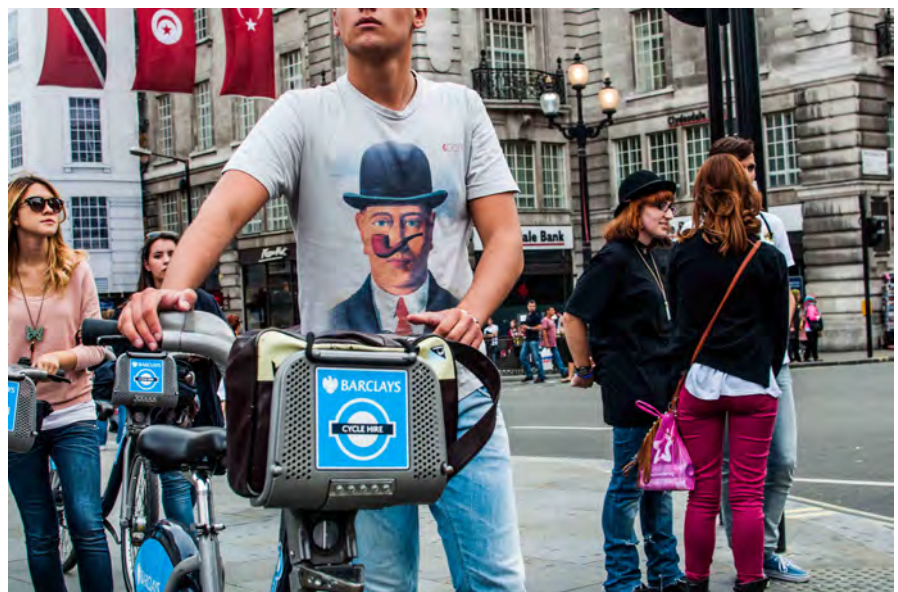
Barthes' (2000, 5) continuation builds a bridge to the second image:

> The photograph has something tautological about it: a pipe here is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the photograph – for convenience's sake, let us accept this universal, which for the moment refers only to the tireless *repetition of contingency* – always carries its referent with itself (emphasis added).

This lucky hip shot, an urban visual rhyme of forms, shapes and colors, further blends artistic representation and urban cultural reality. The repetition of (half) circular figures also seems to metaphorically hint at the cyclical rhythms of the urban everyday. Lefebvre (2004, 30) gives the example of the flows and recurrent timetables of tourists in certain parts of a city. For Lefebvre, cycles are inseparable from the second form of repetition that he sees: linear rhythm. 'The linear is the daily grind, the routine, therefore the perpetual, made up of *chance* and *encounters*' (Lefebvre 2004, 30).
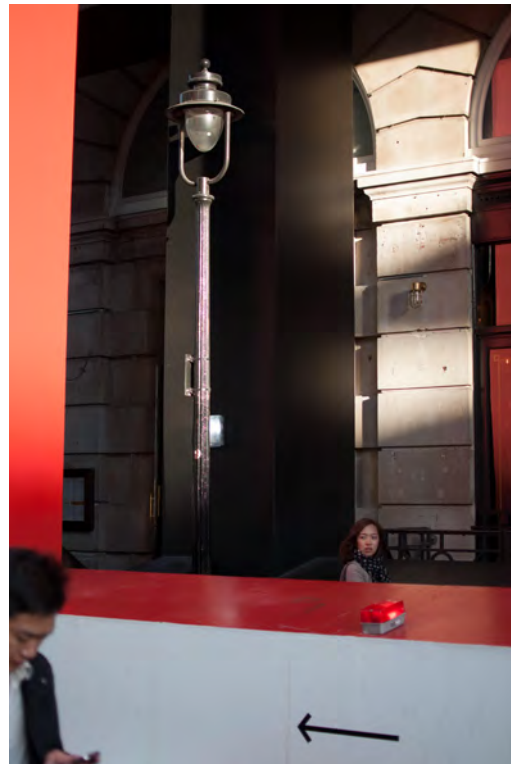
The third picture, above, is also about chance encounters between strangers, the (failed) exchanges of a look and interconnectivity in the city. The rhythm strengthening this linear crossing here is that of the light, of 'the sun and the shadows, the well-lit and the gloomy corners' (Lefebvre 2004, 31). Immediately after capturing this moment, the sun beam piercing the clouds vanished and that spot was all grey again. The scene seems to take place in a narrative 'framework', encouraging the viewer's own fictions.

In the fourth picture, too, non-human dimensions of place – artifacts, such as texts and *signs* – are not mere passive backdrops, but enroll into rhythmic structures (Edensor 2010, 7). For me, the continuous digital loop of walking figures in the background reverberates with the perpetual passing by of businessmen in front of 30 St Mary Axe. The persons walking against the directionalities given by arrows and screens create a disturbing and suspicious effect. As Lefebvre (2004, 34) writes, 'Money no longer renders itself sensible as such, even on the façade of banks. The [city] centre bears the imprint of what it hides, but it hides it. Money passes through circulation.' It is the imposition of bureaucratic and capitalist rhythms upon individuals in the realm of the everyday (Edensor 2010, 13).leisure activities This zone of the City definitely has an own type of rhythm, with almost exclusively men in suits, training their junior staff to dress and behave in the same way in public space. 'Thus public space, the space of representation, becomes ''spontaneously'' a place for […] encounters, *intrigues, diplomacy, deals and negotiations – it theatralises itself*', writes Lefebvre (2004, 96 (emphasis added)).

The last three images are all concerned with the relationship of words included in the image. By this

manoeuvre, I want to reflect on the struggle of textual clarification of pictures, discussed in part one. The included words are not only meta-explanatory elements, but also fundamental to the interplay between text and image.

The shadows of the previous image seem to prolong themselves into the frame of the picture above. 'Other horizons loom without being present, so beyond the sensible and visible order, which reveals political power, other orders suggest themselves: a logic, *a division of labour*, *leisure* activities ["Play"] are also produced' (Lefebvre 2004, 32 (emphasis added)). Against the backdrop of a 'City wisdom' that prescribes the cadence of everyday life, the expressive gesture of pointing disrupts the rhythm of endless maintenance of the material and social world by repetitive cleaners. In Barthes' (2000, 2) terms again:

> Photography suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, *but says nothings else* (…) It points a finger at certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language, [i.e. necessarily an indication by reference] (emphasis added).

For Susan Sontag (1977, 78), 'The photographer – and the consumer of photographs – follows in the footsteps of the ragpicker'. The type of the street sweeper, like the
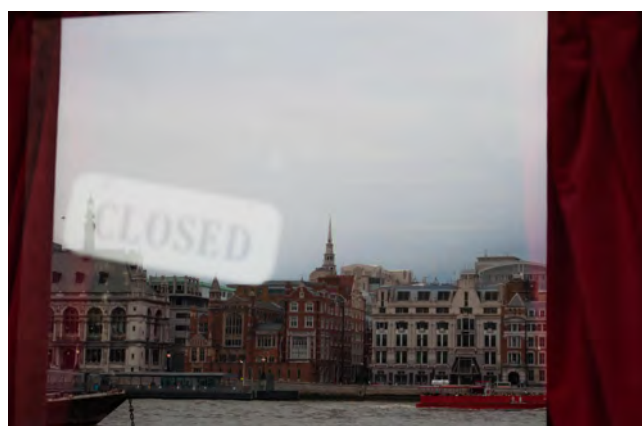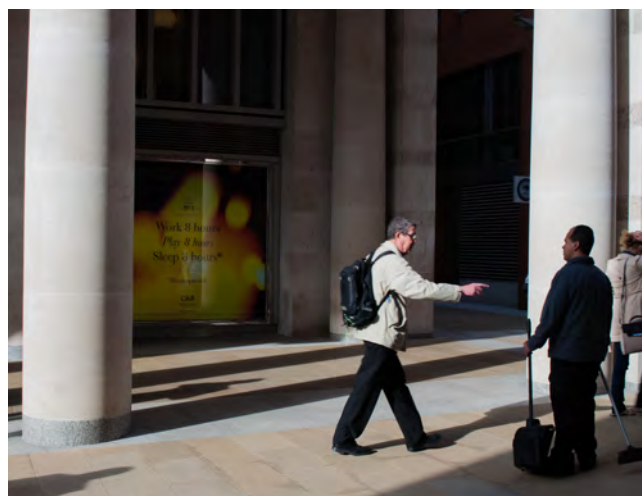
photographer, is responsible for collecting and erasing the bits and pieces of historical layers of 're-fuse of reality' (Kracauer 1960, 55). The entire figure's stance has been stilled, like the effect of a column (Wigoder 2001, 376). This sugges-tion of a division of class is reflected in the architecture, light and shad-ows. other horizons loom without beingpresent,so beyond the sensi-ble and visible order, which reveals political power, other orders suggest themselves: a logic, a division of la-bour,

London has a reputation as 'a dynamic place', with its perpetual disruption of temporal and spatial rhythms, very much manifest in the constant cycles of redevelop-ment. But again, word and image become ambiguous. Who is creat-ing a dynamic place? In the triangle of (averted) gazes that is formed between the man in the suit, the la-borer and the young man, we look *with* the two protagonists. However, once this white fence goes down, these people are often rubbed out in images for city or project branding. Like in the previous pictures, own fictions can be projected upon the scene. For some Londoners at the summer school, the image of young, hooded people, for example, gen-erated associations with the 2011 Riots. For viewers with that link, the shared point of view with the men on the bench can change the whole feeling and meaning of the picture.

By combining the two topics in this visual essay, the artistic prac-tice and text-image combination, the curtains in the final image close on the theatrical space that I have tried to observe and open up in this series.

Conclusion

This article is a testimony of the reflective process and practical ex-perience I have been through thanks to the summer school's offering, rather than an article making major claims or arguments. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to com-bine aesthetically meaningful im-ages with critical or social insights (given the modest timeframe of production). I have tried to find my own balance in the discussed rela-tionship between artistic goals and research-led image-making. Maybe even more than about the sociologi-cal aspect of how we perform our roles (as tourists, business men, la-bourers, youth, lovers …) structured by or opposed to the rhythms that create a city, this photo essay is also about the medium of photography it-self. This relates to the other point that has been brought up about the necessity of text added to images (primarily in an academic context). Although the images can stand on their own, I believe the text definitely adds value and meaning. I wanted to think through my experience with the text-image relationship at the summer school by doing the test of valorising text alongside my own photographs, instead of presenting

them with a short (oral) description. Yet, the summer school offers a great opportunity to develop a portfolio, get instructive feedback on sets of images, and the chance to see one of your pictures professionally printed as part of a small group exhibition. Participants can gain (from) a network of experienced lecturers and diverse co-students or -practitioners. In short, the summer school stimulates and forces you to think about theoretical and methodological aspects in regard to your own practice and plans with urban photography.

International Urban Photography Summer School (iUPSS)
Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR), Goldsmiths University of London
In collaboration with Urban Encounters
Organized by Paul Halliday (MA in Photography and Urban Cultures Course Leader) and Beatriz Véliz Argueta (Coordinator)

3–15 September 2012, at Goldsmiths campus

The 2013 Summer School will take place from 19–31 August. Deadline for applying is June 10. See also:

http://www.gold.ac.uk/cucr/summer-school/
http://iupss.com/
http://www.gold.ac.uk/cucr/

http://www.iavu.org/
http://www.urbanencounters.org/
http://www.urbanphotofest.org/
Site Mandy Lee Jandrell: http://www.mandyleejandrell.info/
Site Marco Bohr: http://www.macobo.com/
Site Laura Cuch: http://www.lauracuch.com

Endnotes

1 http://www.gold.ac.uk/cucr/summer-school/

2 The notion of the flâneur was mainly developed by Walter Benjamin, drawing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. The term is understood, here, as an essentially urban figure, who derives knowledge from observation through the act of walking without an a priori purpose, goal or objective.

3 In the UK, there is no legal restriction on taking photographs of people in public places and publishing them, without a model release, for non-commercial purposes.

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