

# Scenes & Sounds

## Introduction

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*This section presents an urban take, almost at times subliminal, on behaviour and ways of being/acting more often featured in arts, literature and history. The emphasis is on everyday life in cities, on investigations of power structures as they emerge and how they are experienced by people.*

*Through an ethnographic approach Scenes & Sounds presents individual and community projects, articulated through the humanities. These accounts express the multiple realities of the dwellers in the metropolis, revealing the processes through which cities have become constructed through broken narratives—in an emerging historical perspective.*

*Scenes & Sounds introduces insightful urban stories from authors, writers, poets, artists and ordinary people, who contest, question and articulate reflections of urban life, with the aim of providing alternative understandings and perceptions of changes.*

*Scenes & Sounds opens with 'Photographing people is wrong. With a Camera in Kolkata'. In this piece, Ariadne van de Ven reflects on her experiences of taking photos in the streets of Kolkata, trying to get away from 'being a tourist' whilst emphasizing the complexity of the context. By exploring her relationship with photographic representation of India as compared to her lived experience in the streets, the author provides an engaging—vivid and questioning—account of 'otherness', both in regard to the local dwellers in the Occidental imagination as well as her own position in the eyes of the people she meets.*

*Paula Lökmán, Scenes and Sounds Editor*

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# Photographing people is wrong

## With a camera in Kolkata<sup>1,2</sup>

Ariadne van de Ven

It is a dirty word, 'tourist', with its associations of superficiality, insensitivity, loud voices and louder shirts. 'Tourist with camera' is an even dirtier concept, with its implications of exploitation, cowardice and trophy snapshots. Thirty years after *On Photography*, Susan Sontag's cursory dismissal is still widely regarded as the last word on the subject:

'The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter.' (1977, pp. 9–10)

Sontag herself was and remained deeply ambivalent about the photography, but most of those who quote her have no such qualms: in their moral universe the only saving grace for a tourist is to refrain from taking pictures altogether.<sup>3</sup> John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) is still regarded as *the* book on the subject, despite his essentialising of 'the tourist' and of 'the gaze'—and despite his lack of interest in what, or more especially *whom*, the gaze gazes at. Critical suspicion of photography itself, especially on the left, has reinforced the widespread condescension, damning the camera for being an instrument of power, of violence, of invasion. As Susie Linfield points out, for the past century most photography critics have 'approach[ed] photography with suspicion, mistrust, anger and fear' (2006, para 3). Sontag summed it all up when she called the camera 'a sublimation of the gun'—thereby blaming the object for the uses that human beings can make of it

(1977, p. 14). The language of photography—aiming, shooting, taking, capturing—strengthened the case for the prosecution. This blanket condemnation, however, has left us all without the critical tools for a subtle, sophisticated debate about the politics of photography. This debate is essential because the ethical issues go far beyond photography: not only photographing, but seeing itself is political. As Peter Osborne puts it, 'the question "What do I see?" is political' (2000, p. 140).<sup>4</sup> We continually interpret what we see in photographs, on TV screens and in the world around us; burying our cameras is not a solution.

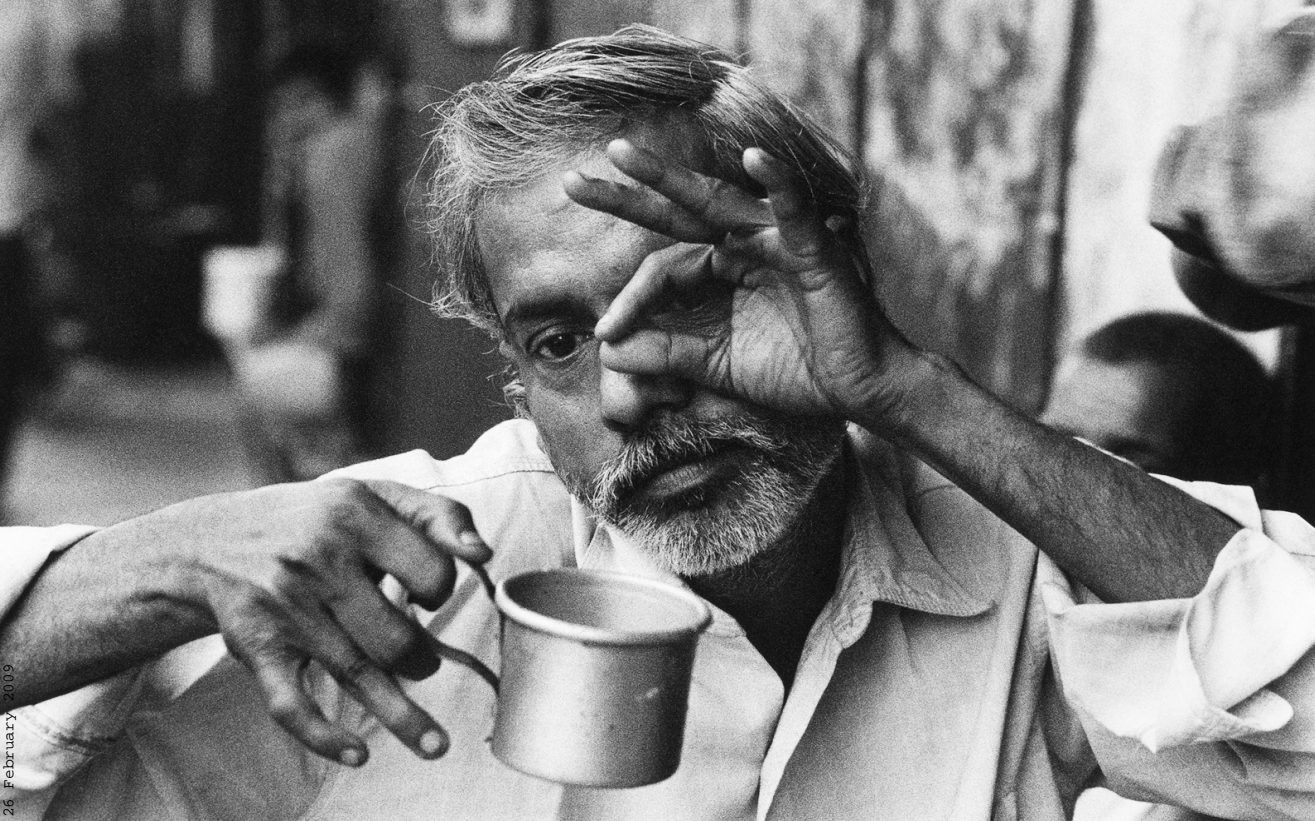
There are millions of us, taking our annual breaks in far-away countries with our passports, malaria tablets and cameras. Having absorbed the universal disdain for tourists, I tried to get away from being such a specimen in my first few visits to Kolkata as I wandered through the streets with a camera around my neck.<sup>5</sup> In an endeavour that is, in retrospect, as hilarious as it was hopeless, I pretended to be a traveller or aspired to be a researcher. The Kolkatans were never convinced but my attempts kept me so busy that a much more important issue took time to register: we do not travel only with luggage but with our heads full of expectations of what we shall see when we 'get there'. The first time I went to India it was with a head full of fragments of tourist information, phrases from Rushdie, half-remembered historical dates and disjointed political facts, and above all a jumble of visual images. I suspect that in many a western mind's eye there is a strange collage labelled 'India'.<sup>6</sup> This India, like the rest of the majority world, is carved up into

hell, populated by victims of poverty and violence (traditionally, although no longer, in grainy black-and-white); and paradise, inhabited by turbaned servants and beautiful sari-clad women ('in glorious Technicolor').<sup>7</sup> There may be an elephant or two. The resulting idea of India in our collective optical memory is much less complex than the impressions of cities such as New York or societies such as Britain. Images are not harmless. They shape our ideas when we think about the state of the world and guide our perceptions when we travel. It is significant that the visual representations of India that we are exposed to and absorb in the West are still predominantly made by ... Westerners. The things and people that I saw in India hit not a blank screen, but one already filled with that strange collage. I walked and made photographs, holiday after holiday, mile after urban mile, roll after roll of film, in different Indian cities; and the Western-made mental image continually collided with the reality in front of my eyes. I regarded myself as a well-educated, deeply liberal, thoroughly post-colonial, card-carrying feminist; but what my eyes perceived simply did not fit my emotional assumptions and political opinions. Like all confrontations with one's own ignorance, this was painful. Drastic measures were needed and between holidays, I started to read about India and about photography in India, aware as I went along just how little I still knew.

It would be naïve to think that as a European tourist with a camera in an Indian city in the twenty-first century I could occupy a politics-free zone even if I wanted to. From the early 1850s until Independence in 1947, the Britishers took photographs in India that reinforced the ideology of Empire and made the colonizing argument in pictures.<sup>8</sup> In the eight-volume *The People of India* (Watson and Kaye, 1868–75), 'the Indians' were captured by the camera, catalogued and measured and used as proof that 'they' were incapable of self-government. The colonial past often casts a long shadow, and it is not surprising that tourism and photography are

frequently regarded as extensions, joined at the hip, of the imperialist attitude (Osborne 2000, p.112). Like other generalizations about photography, however, it does not get us very far. The fact that the majority of Western contemporary images of India repeat stereotypes of suffering or exoticism does not get us very far either. The real question is: can our Western eyes escape all those old and new clichés to look differently at India, without exploiting human beings and without perpetuating neo-colonial attitudes travel-brochure platitudes?

For there I still am, in a street somewhere in North Kolkata with very limited local knowledge, no command of the languages spoken there and no solid historical sense of cities, either. Moreover, in no small part thanks to Mother Teresa, 'Calcutta' has the unenviable world-wide reputation of being India at its most extreme—in poverty, in squalor and in shocks to the Western sensibility—in short, hell on earth. The Kolkatans, lively, opinionated, witty and certainly not only 'poor,' do not deserve this. The streets buzz with activity, trade and talk. I walk around self-consciously imagining that I am conspicuous because I am white—until I recognize that it may be because I am a woman on my own in a city with very few tourists. Even later it dawns on me that I must be freakishly tall by Bengali standards.<sup>9</sup> Then I work out that the European culture of urban invisibility does not exist here anyway. Whatever the reason, invisible I am not. Children, women and men spot me with my camera and ask or signal for a photograph—in fact, many women feel free to play with my camera in a way they do not with male photographers.<sup>10</sup> So, with the critical eyes of Sontag and Urry and rest of them burning in my back, do I remain pure and refuse, focusing instead on buildings, graffiti, dogs and sunsets? Do I make the pictures but never develop the films? Do I print the negatives but keep them hidden like Victorian erotica? Would not all those responses be patronizing to those who asked me to make their portraits? With their highly sophisticated, ancient visual culture it is not as if the



**Figure 1** The man with the battered tea mug. Photograph © Ariadne van de Ven.

*The man with the battered tea mug gave me perhaps the single most important encounter in making me rethink the photographic orthodoxies. It was a late afternoon in early December 2002. The fading light was glowing warm yellow; in order to continue photographing, I had just changed to a 3200 ASA film, leaning against a wall in Free School Street—the top end, where all the spice merchants are. From a small *chaiwallah's* booth I bought a clay cup of boiling hot, sweet, milky chai. As I tried not to burn my fingers or my tongue, their other customer turned to me and made a sign of a frame with his hands. I focused and sorted the exposure and he started to perform a ballet with his hands and his tea mug. Playing to the audience of passers-by who had stopped as well as to my camera, he first made a looking-at-you gesture with his left hand, then cupped his hand around his mouth, and finally 'hid' behind the mug. A man behind him moved to hold a blackened milk pan over his head. Those are the three exposures I made, then everybody burst out*

*laughing and I received a kiss on the cheek. Not sure how to handle that one, I did a runner. Walking on, I was not at all sure that these would work as photographs—I'm not very reliable, technically. It had, in any case, been an enjoyable, somewhat ambiguous encounter.*

*Two of the three photographs did 'work', at least for me. And they helped me think, about the nature of urban photographic encounters. This brief sequence of street ballet made me explore what the camera could actually set in motion. Year after year, I went back to Kolkata, the city where, in Nirad Chaudhuri's words 'the citizens showed an extreme avidity for new sensations, and their equally extreme anxiety to avoid boredom at any cost made them alert to notice any novelty and enthusiastic to discuss it' (1951, p. 366). And whenever my appearance provided an opportunity to avoid boredom, there would be a fleeting encounter between the tourist and the citizen.*





**Figure 2** The woman in Sovabazar. Photograph © Ariadne Van de Ven.

*It was a Sunday afternoon in February 2007: siesta time throughout Kolkata. I walked from Sovabazar metro station through Sovabazar to the river Hooghli: a beautiful old street with a communist local HQ, an old-fashioned post office, a very grand chemist with marble steps. Everybody was relaxing: women surrounded by playing children, small groups of men playing cards, sleeping shapes in patches of shadow. Street life slowed down: not the Kolkata of popular western imagination. Near the river, there was a small group of snotty-faced children playing around a wooden cart, on which a female figure was dozing. The children's reactions to my presence woke her up and she waved me to come nearer. I gestured if I might photograph the children. Leaning on one elbow, she watched me, her hair standing on end, as unruly as mine. I turned to her and performed a question with my*

*camera. Again she nodded. As usual, I made two pictures in quick succession, partly because of my technical insecurity and partly to give the lie to the decisive moment. On this contact sheet, there appear two identical frames of her looking lazily, contentedly, somewhat ironically into the lens—one eye half-closed in assessment of who I might be. In this easy, total self-possession her body language makes a wonderfully subversive comment on that long tradition of oil paintings of the 'seductive' woman offering her horizontal body to the male viewer with her head propped up on one cupped hand. More important, she remains a mystery, like the man with the tea mug. They are not reducible to icons of anything, nor to items on what might be my agenda, nor to pieces of evidence for the stereotypical view of Kolkata as a city of abject poverty and nothing else.*

Kolkatans are naïve about images. I hold on to my camera.

Having decided to go with this particular urban flow, I think about the nature of the Kolkatan encounters. In the midst of all the criss-crossing glances, I start asking people if I may make a portrait; some say yes, some say no. The camera is the means of communication beyond language, sparking a purely visual moment of interaction. As it grew into a project, *The Eyes of the Street Look Back* was the phrase that attached itself to the photographs. I may hold the camera, but the person in front of the lens chooses how to be.<sup>11</sup> And they are all sorts of things: they look serious or they smile, they pull my leg or they frown, they strike a pose or they laugh. They all refuse to be pinned down, refuse to be part of my or anyone else's agenda. And in that moment they shatter that strange, two-dimensional Western image of 'India' or 'Calcutta.' This is a political challenge to the view of the world fostered in Europe. Edward Said throws down the gauntlet, 'We [Palestinians] do more than stand passively in front of whoever, for whatever reason, has wanted to look at us' (1986, p. 166). All this is also in direct opposition to the deeply entrenched convention of (Western) documentary photography that a photograph is more 'true' when the photographer has not been spotted—like the narrator in a Victorian novel, the street photographer wants to be God: omnipresent, all-seeing, invisible. The Kolkatans have no time for such illusions; they see me and they respond. In any case, in India the camera's 'invisibility' would slot neatly into the colonial history of the white photographer in absolute control.<sup>12</sup> As has become clear, I am slow on the uptake, but in the end I realized that the photographic *exchange* was much less cowardly and much more truthful than sneaking around catching people unawares (or asleep). It is also more fun for all concerned: a bit of street theatre (Figures 1 and 2).

Both the making and the viewing of photographs can challenge our responses to 'otherness;' this, to me, is where photography's

political potential lies. Richard Sennett pins down the urban 'reaction of disengagement when immersed in difference[:] if something begins to disturb or touch me, I need only keep walking to stop feeling' (1991, p. 129). By contrast, the camera roots me to the spot and stops me in the moment. It is not a defence shield, as Sontag claims, but a pivot for a real encounter, however fleeting. Of course there are tourist photographs that are invasive, exploitative, stereotypical—but they need not be. On the contrary, precisely because we serve nobody's agenda and are not making a living, as tourists we are free to be strangers meeting strangers in the urban street—we need not 'hunt' for the icons of misery or the symbols of exoticism. These moments can offer glimpses of the complexity of human lives that we do not otherwise see, in the newspaper articles or travel brochures. The impact of these photographs is that they shake our 'illusion of knowledge.'<sup>13</sup> This makes each of the encounters, and its resulting photograph, a small political act of resistance.

Those of us who want to be concerned citizens and photographers cannot run away from photographing human beings. We should not even want to, even if the responsibilities are hard and the ethics are complex. We know from unforgettable photographs of the past that in the photographic image the personal is frequently at its most powerfully political, and vice versa. As John Berger (1982) keeps reminding us, an image is much more effective, both politically and aesthetically, when it insists on asking questions than when it pretends to provide answers. This is why my friends at DRiK, the activist photography agency in Dhaka and Kolkata, are more angry about Western documentary photographers who show people in India as helpless victims in a timeless predicament than they are with tourists waving cameras and credit cards around. Shahidul Alam argues that 'the majority world screams out for the icons of poverty to be replaced by images of humanity' (2006). In the same spirit, Wim Wenders has said about his films,

'The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words: what you show people, day in day out, is political .... [T]he most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change.' (2001, p. 333)

I shall probably never entirely solve my dilemmas. For one thing, even when my making of a portrait is a collaborative act in the street, the photograph as object can still slip into an offensive stereotype after its journey to the west. My political aim is still to trigger questions in the viewer about complex contexts. One of these questions should be why our eyes are still directed so often towards human faces reduced to simple emblems of 'the other' or symbols of 'suffering' that deny the possibility of change. If, by contrast, we allow photography to be an interaction, the person in front of the lens has as great an input as the person behind the camera—and together we create a moment that throws a little light on what it is to be a human being in this world, in this city, on this day. The ultimate point is: if, these days, photographing people is politically incorrect, won't we end up with a collective portrait of the twenty-first century in which only celebrities are visible? That might be ethically less complicated—but it would also be politically toothless.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 An earlier, shorter version of this paper appeared in *Street Signs* (Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of London) Autumn, 2007.

- 2 'formerly known as Calcutta,' as the airline confirmations phrase it.
- 3 John Hutnyk approves of the visitors to Calcutta who stop taking photographs, 'having become acutely aware of the voyeuristic nature of its projection, or simply feeling some sense of discomfort' (1996: 166).
- 4 Osborne is discussing *After the Last Sky* by Edward Said and Jean Mohr, so I quote him out of context but in a truthful spirit.
- 5 This paper, and the hobby that became a project, are based on six annual fortnights' holidays from 2002 to 2008.
- 6 'The West' is so crude a term as to be almost unusable—but not quite. Politically, it still refers to an economic and political power block. I capitalise the word not to glorify it but to indicate it is a fiction. Similarly, 'we' in 'the West' are not a homogenous group, but 'we' share enough, in relation to India, to make us a group. I include myself.
- 7 For many in what are still often patronisingly called 'developing countries,' 'majority world' is the preferred phrase for the huge chunk of the world that is not the G8.
- 8 This is beautifully analysed by Christopher Pinney (1997: 34–64).
- 9 1.75m or 5'8"
- 10 The implications of this visual freedom for women and the portraits I make with them lie outside the scope of this skimming-the-surface paper.
- 11 Most of these black-and-white portraits are face-only and with shallow depth of field. These choices reflect an attempt to try get away from 'aren't they "other"/ exotic/spiritual/poor' clichés.
- 12 'Western' is not always 'white'—but even today, most of the images of India in the Western media are made by photographers who are both. And male, too.
- 13 In 'Is the World Really Shrinking?' Doreen Massey says 'the illusion of knowledge can be both dangerous...and potentially imperial' (2006, halfway)

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