

## *Jeffersonville, Indiana*

Dana Lixenberg (Amsterdam, 1964) received her training at the London College of Printing and the Rievelde Academie in Amsterdam. Soon after moving to New York in 1990 she started doing freelance work for Dutch newspapers and magazines. In 1993 *Vrij Nederland* magazine assigned her to report on Los Angeles after the Rodney Kings riots, resulting in her by-now famous photographic series of the Imperial Courts Housing Project in Watts, the notorious ghetto of Los Angeles. Lixenberg took these photographs when the retrial against the police officers who had so brutally assaulted Rodney King was going on. In the entire neighborhood, nerves were in edge over the outcome of the trial – because if the police officers were acquitted, a new wave of violence would most certainly break out.

Lixenberg's way of portraying the inhabitants of this community – the turf of the feared PJ Watts Crips gang – is an absolute eye opener: she depicts them as fully rounded personalities, not as a stereotyped representatives of black, pour America. Dirk van Weelden described her approach: 'She stripped them of everything that directly referred to the impoverishment of their environment or to the media clichés about gang members in black ghettos. So no sunglasses, weapons or tough stances with secret hand signals. She figured that you could gain the most insight into the life of South Central if you looked at people as individuals'

The photo reportage was published in *VIBE*, a magazine aimed at black American culture that was just getting started at the time, and it drew a great deal of attention. This was her breakthrough in the United States. Assignments followed from well-known illustrated magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker* and *Life*. In the Netherlands, besides working for *Vrij Nederland*, she also regularly works for publications like *Volkskrant Magazine* and *NRC Handelsblad*.

Lixenberg's portraits can be best described as 'personal documentaries'. Her intent is to make visible the experiences and living conditions of people portrayed in her photographs, insofar as these can be inferred from postures and facial expressions. She therefore eliminates as much as possible any direct indication of the social position of the people she portrays. She emphatically avoids any rhetorical or theatrical means: the lighting is uniform and non-dramatic; distracting devices or props are purposely omitted. She wants to photograph her models in such a way that they are striking as individuals, without using artificial devices and without the role of the photographer being demonstratively present. She wants to let people express themselves in a natural manner, without exaggerated posturing or assuming a pose.

Her sober style of making photographs is closely related to the use of a 4x5 inch field camera. This technical camera requires a slow and rather laborious method of working which demands a lot of concentration and patience from both photographer and model. This 'inconvenience', however, is compensated by the incredible clarity of the image, in which an amazing amount of detail comes to light. And this is exactly what Dana Lixenberg is seeking: small, inconspicuous details such as the position of a hand, the structure of the skin or a certain glance of the eye.

With her approach, Dana Lixenberg seems to follow in the footsteps of the famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), who in his book *Images a la Sauvette*

published in 1952 argued that photography can only be valuable if the shot is taken at the precise moment when everything converges. It's all about capturing that one crucial moment in which the climax of the event coincides with a well-chosen composition that gives the event its proper expressions and significance. People and objects, light and shadow, facial expressions and postures, all must reflect the essence of the situation in that one moment. Or as he himself once put it: Your mind, your eyes and your heart must be on the same wavelength.

Whereas Cartier-Bresson employed a handy 35mm camera with a standard lens, which enabled him to mingle unobtrusively amongst people and approach his subjects almost without being noticed, Dana Lixenberg likes to direct the process and collaborate with her subjects, creating a state of concentration that leads to the moments she captures.

But even though Dana Lixenberg's sphere of activity is technically and thematically more circumscribed than that of Cartier-Bresson, photography for her, too, is a means of seeking and maintaining a state of openness. It must never degenerate into a form of proving oneself or affirming one's own inventiveness and originality. She does not believe in fabricated or staged photography. Like Cartier-Bresson, she holds the view that reality always dictates the photograph. No tricks must be played, such as manipulating the photo afterwards in the darkroom or on the computer. Photographs must depict reality in a natural yet penetrating manner and tell an articulate story with great precision.

Dana Lixenberg does not stage or judge. Her basic principle, as her book of photographs entitled *UNITED STATES* clearly shows, is to always make honest, individual portraits – no matter whether they involve famous or anonymous people. The celebrities she has thus far photographed, like for example Iggy Pop, Sean Penn, Kathleen Turner, Whitney Houston, John McEnroe, Robert Duvall and Bianca Jagger, in most cases dropped their usual bravura. In her portraits they are clearly more the individual and less the star, with the result they seem almost unfamiliar. As Ron Kaal wrote: 'They look into the lens, or preferably just past it, in resignation – as if the photographer is not there. Not one moment do they attempt to charm the audience; their gaze is vacant, directed inward. You would not recognize these stars in the supermarket. Dana Lixenberg's photographs make us perceive things differently, not through technical tricks and odd frameworks, but by their extreme ordinariness, even though the subjects are far from ordinary.'

With anonymous people the opposite seems to happen. They look into the lens proudly and self-confidently, even though their situation often gives them no reason for doing so. The girl in the white suit, her head seductively turned toward the camera, one leg lifted coquettishly, is no nurse with the allure of a fashion model, but a prisoner sentenced to death. The picture of the woman with a child on her lap would be perfect as an advertisement for domestic bliss, but reality is a portrait of a mother and son both suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder. And the self-assured woman with flowing hair, dressed in a white evening gown with spaghetti straps, is no successful business woman on her way to a chic party, but a homeless person. What seems innocuous at first sight turns into something extremely dire through the caption.

Dana Lixenberg has been photographing homeless people in Jeffersonville since 1997. What began as a one-off assignment for *Jane Magazine*, developed into a long-term project for which she has by now photographed around 120 people as well as a series of landscapes. Completely in keeping with the rest of her work, Dana Lixenberg does not confront us in this

project with heavy, dramatic photos of the urban outcasts such as sickly junkies, vagrant without prospect, incurable alcoholics or dazed psychiatric patients – in short the down and out. The extreme, the spectacular, is not what she's after. On the contrary, she focuses on ordinary homeless people who have been granted temporary shelter by Haven House Services, an organization that aids homeless families and individuals in Jeffersonville, a small town of 29,000 in southern Indiana. These are people who have landed in an acute crisis situation, such as families who have been put out on the street because they couldn't pay the rent, single mothers who do not have enough income to support their children or men who have had an accident on the job and are not eligible for benefits.

Her project is a direct indictment against the mercilessness of the American system. Ever since social benefits were drastically reduced under Ronald Reagan and the welfare system was radically reformed under Bill Clinton, a large percentage of the American people have been living on or below the poverty line. You cannot make ends meet in America on the salary of an unskilled worker. That is not enough to live on by far. Millions of Americans have to hold down a second job, but often that still doesn't mean that they can afford a decent home. And even on a double minimum wage salary, eating well remains an unobtainable luxury (usually people have to be satisfied with fast food and canned goods), let alone being able to take out health insurance. This insecure social structure leaves many people extremely vulnerable and can all too easily deprive them of their human dignity.

For her book *Nickel and Dimed*, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich led the life of an unschooled laborer for a while, working as a waitress, cleaning lady, chambermaid and geriatric aide, and personally experiencing what it means to have to get by on \$6-\$7 an hour – while back in 1998, when she started her project, you had to be earning at least \$8.90 an hour in order to be able to afford a small two room apartment. And then consider that approximately 30% of the American working population struggles along at only \$8 an hour or less. What Ehrenreich describes is a nightmare: having to live in a musty mobile home or grubby hotel, being dependent on food stamps from a charity organization, being subject without any rights to the whims of a boss, having no resistance because of physical exhaustion. As she herself says, she was caught in a downward spiral of permanent humiliation, for if you're constantly being reminded that you are at the bottom of the heap, you simply give up and at a certain point start to accept that sorry status. Barbara Ehrenreich offers devastating evidence that, as a reviewer wrote, jobs alone are not enough; the minimum wage is an insulting farce, and receiving a paycheck is not the same as earning a living, as being able to really live.

Dana Lixenberg's project on the homeless focuses on this hidden suffering, on this invisible, almost unidentifiable problem. Not in a spectacular way, but rather in subtle fashion. The people she portrays look perfectly normal and ordinary and do not display aberrant behavior in any way whatsoever. It's not clear from the photographs that they are homeless. But precisely for that reason it is so disquieting. Lixenberg shows that the danger of losing one's home, at least in America, lies right around the corner. According to her, it's not a problem you can disassociate yourself from, it's not something that necessarily only happens to others. The dividing line between 'them and us' is very thin. She purposely had not shown the subjects' distressing living conditions; she does not want to stigmatize them. She tries to make genuine, strong portraits. Even though they are in a quite hopeless situation, that doesn't mean that the situation in which they find themselves defines their identity.

Dana Lixenberg by no means pretends that she can effect social change through her work. She does try to make certain situations visible, tangible and recognizable to everyone. In her work, there's no voyeurism of human suffering, but rather empathy and compassion. And that involvement leads to poignant and probing images of the vulnerability of human existence.

Karel Schampers  
Frans Halsmuseum/de Hallen, 2005