

DANA LIXENBERG

IMPERIAL COURTS

All images © Dana Lixenberg. Spider, 1993





J.S.O. 1993



Toussaint, 1993

“Once you’re present at a place you start seeing ‘The layers’. What seemed inaccessible suddenly is not.”

“I try to create an atmosphere where the subject falls into a position unique to them.”

— DANA LIXENBERG, 2013

I was fortunate to meet Dutch photographer Dana Lixenberg, at what seems in hindsight, an auspicious moment in both of our lives. I was just settling into my position at *Vibe* magazine, as Director of Photography, in the fall of 1993, after a summer of brainstorming and enthusiastic anticipation among my colleagues.

There was a mandate, and reasonable expectation on the part of the editorial leadership, that the photographs in *Vibe* be memorable, beautiful, compassionate, urgent (because Hip-Hop in all its guises was urgent), relevant, powerful, outrageous (because an outrageous figure emerged in Rap music virtually every month), well-crafted, and true to the authenticity of dress, behaviour, lyrical flow, diva dazzle, hardcore swagger, and the formulaic merging of R&B with Hip-Hop; as these were the primary imperatives in the editorial treatment of Hip-Hop culture.

To instill the earliest editions of *Vibe* with more heft, I was encouraged to find material for photo essays, documentary projects, fine art layouts, and stylized fashion pictorials that were not slavishly commercial yet appealing to an urban readership, reflecting both the analogue and the burgeoning digital aesthetic. It was at this juncture, and

under these particular circumstances, that I met Lixenberg, who was referred to me by another *Vibe* employee. I remember my colleague’s animated excited tone about her work, and his confidence that her photographs were ideal for *Vibe*’s mission; and it was surprising to us that Lixenberg was working on a project that would span over 20 years, documenting the inhabitants of the Imperial Courts housing community in Watts, California, shot entirely in black-and-white, using her Wista 5x4 Japanese camera placed on a tripod, and one 150mm lens.

Vibe used black-and-white extensively in each issue, which went against the grain of how editorial content was generally supposed to look, and therein lay one of our artistic differences with conventional wisdom and the majority of mainstream publications of that period. Truly, black-and-white invigorated the editorial, and there was an enthusiastic appreciation of its effects, visual beauty, aesthetic rightness, and the extensively flattering artistic gloss inherent to the film medium. Lixenberg’s work contributed substantially to the visual direction of *Vibe*, and she was assigned Cover stories with acclaimed and controversial figures such as Prince, Eminem, The Notorious B.I.G., and Tupac Shakur. But it was the publication in 1993 of an excerpt of her *Imperial Courts* project, in a photo essay entitled “LA Stories” that attracted a rare quality of attention, admiration, and genuine respect. Her documentation of that community, photographed in a heightened yet formal visual style, resonated with our readers.

Spurred by an assignment she received around 1992, on the “Rebuilding of LA After The Watts Race Riots”, Lixenberg was introduced to PJ Watts Crips leader Tony Bogard by The Black Carpenters Association. She told Bogard that she wanted to do a project on the particular Imperial Courts housing complex where he ruled as “reformed gangbanger–turned–peacemaker.” Bogard was the crucial contact, guide, and liaison that introduced her to the Imperial Courts community, and who brokered a peace between The Crips and Bloods, before he was killed in 1994.

Lixenberg sought to explore, in her words, “something inaccessible”, which could not be captured without humility and a capacity for hanging out until an essential trust was forged. A word-of-mouth approval circulated among the inhabitants of the Imperial Courts community that despite the fact she was a white European woman, her intentions were honourable. During her subsequent visits to Imperial Courts, Lixenberg brought 14 x 11 prints for her sitters, a gesture that reinforced the sincerity of her intentions, and conveyed a quality of integrity, which couldn’t be dismissed due to her race. “Once you’re present at a place you start seeing ‘the layers’. What seemed inaccessible suddenly is not,” said Lixenberg.

Tenderness is demonstrated throughout the *Imperial Courts* project, as in the stark sleekly sensuous portrait of J 50 taken in 1993 and again while pregnant in 2008. What is evidenced is the contrast between her proud youthful demeanour and the more subtle emotionally ambiguous reading of the later portrait. The passage of time is represented in the shedding of youthful personas and fanciful grooming styles, as in her dramatically different studies of Toussaint in 1993, seated, sporting quirky distinctive braids, and in 2008, hair fully shorn, stoic, reflective, with a cigarette in his hand. By returning to photograph certain of her subjects years after their initial contact, Lixenberg establishes a thematic continuity pertaining to the vestiges of time, and the degrees of change that can be recorded by the camera. In these series portrayals, we notice shifts in how the sitters perceive themselves, which suggest the larger changes that occur in their lives.

In her masterful composition *Dominos* (1993), four men are seated outside, raptly engaged in their game, oblivious to the camera, in a scene that recalls Cezanne’s Card Players. Painterly in its tonal palette of different shades of grey, and exemplary framing of space, *Dominos* doesn’t force itself upon the viewer, but slowly reveals its power through prolonged attention. Lixenberg’s groupings of people can seem almost artless in their random sprawl across the frame.

A wry irony informs *Tish’s Baby Shower* (2008), with its comic panorama of balloons and chairs, awaiting the arrival of the partygoers. And in *Untitled 9* (2010), Lixenberg’s acute architectural framing of an especially photogenic sector of the housing project evokes an almost sublime feeling of order, safety, and formal rigour.

Lixenberg remarks that she “found her visual language with the *Imperial Courts* project”, a moving yet shrewdly quiet range of pictures, which afforded her subjects the pleasure of being themselves as compelling individuals, as opposed to dehumanised victims in the incendiary historical aftermath of the Watts Race Riots, and the more recent trials of the late Rodney King, whose brutal assault by Los Angeles police officers in 1991 ignited a collective level of rage and

suspicion, that contributed to the 1992 LA riots, wherein 53 people were killed, and over two thousand injured.

“You always have to find the ‘moment’ — just the right glance, the placement of the hands...” Lixenberg explains excitedly, remembering the circumstances that led her to adopt certain strategies of framing and composition, to amplify through craft the unforced thereness of her culturally neglected subjects. “I’m sort of waiting for the pictures; it’s not only about the form (and how the subjects are positioned in the frame), I feel it in my gut when it (the picture) feels right. I work very fast, and the people are upside down in the viewfinder. I may take a ‘fake’ picture to put the subjects in the mood. Something happens, and sometimes I’m not sure.”

Working exclusively with the 5 x 4 camera, and later, adding video to her documentation, Lixenberg visited the *Imperial Courts* location recurrently, incrementally adding subjects often recommended by her sitters, or doing additional shoots with those previously photographed, establishing a visual and temporal sequel to their first appearance in her opus, which elicited tales of their whereabouts, whether certain people were still alive, or how their lives had changed over the years. Through her steady progress and conviction toward her subjects, Lixenberg enlarges the scope and nuanced humanity that pervades this subtle, yet often iconic, corpus of pictures.

Intellectually and culturally, America has long been a region of conciliatory alliances between disparate classes, who have stubbornly pushed back against racism and dubious notions of entitlement. In the *Imperial Courts* photographs, such issues hover beneath the surface analysis about what these images represent, whom they are intended for, and what truths are unearthed through Lixenberg’s methodical efforts at collaboration, her sober yet celebratory attention to the other, and perhaps above all, her vigilant self-critical dedication to the craft of photography.

Despite their monolithic emotionally reserved surfaces, which reflect Lixenberg’s skepticism toward theatrical flourishes and self-conscious posturing, her cast of subjects surge throughout this dazzling series with a collective cool and an unfussy sense of elegance that imbues these men, women, and children with a quiet fire, and vivid sense of style and self. She taps into another no less substantial brand of charisma, informed by urban attitudes, and a quality of pride, of being, which is dignified, however casually that these denizens present themselves. The *Imperial Courts* project, Lixenberg ventures, is “an ode to the community”.

GEORGE PITTS

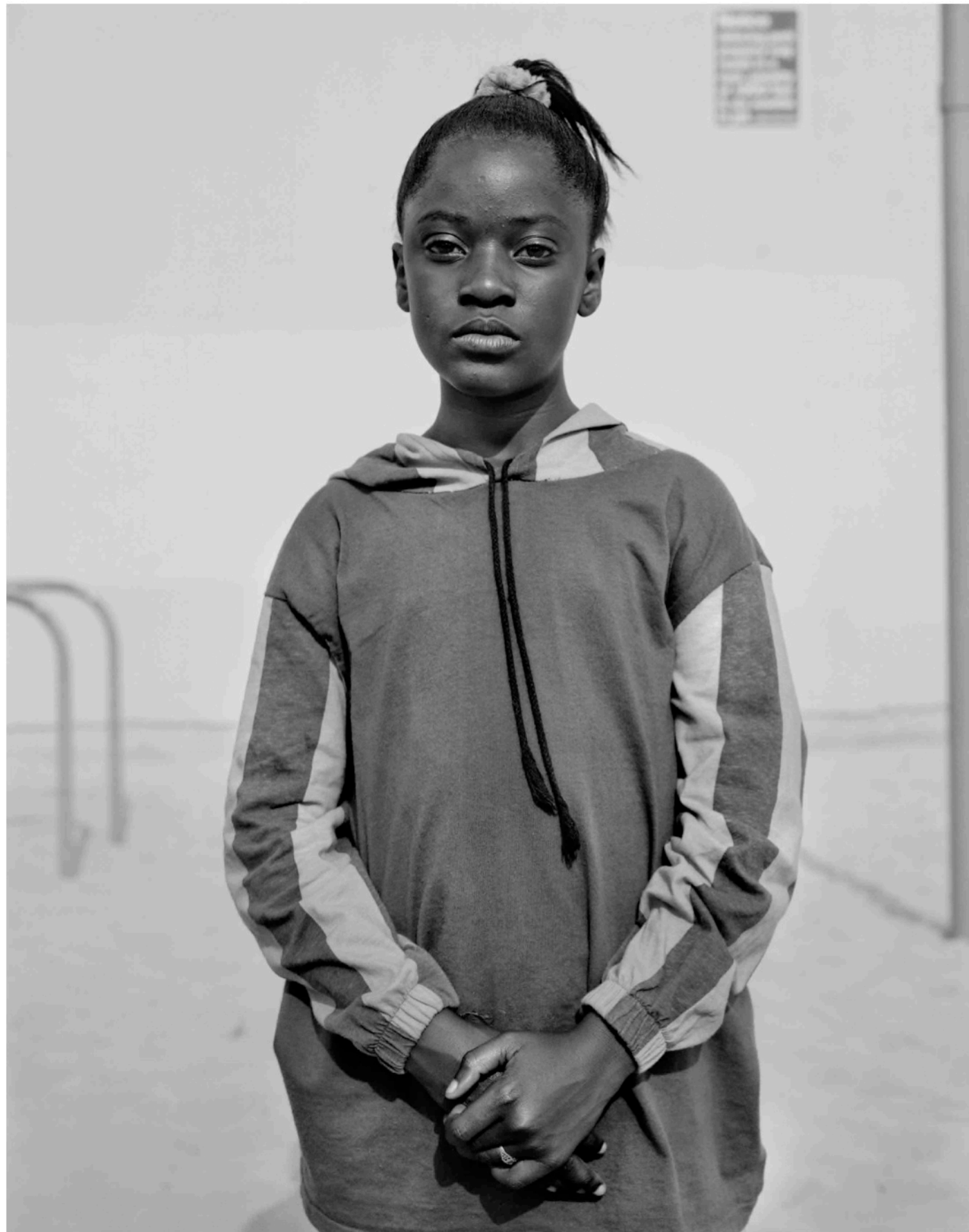
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Dominoes, 1993



Tish's Baby Shower, 2008



Solena, 1993



Sa'Marra (Solena's daughter), 2012



J 50, 2008

Toussaint, 2008

