



Camerawork

Luther Konadu

About the Contributors:

Luther Konadu is an artist and writer of Ghanaian parentage. He runs *Public Parking*, an online publication for critical thought and tangential conversations. His studio activities are project-based and realized through photographic print media that opens up towards sculptural gestures. He recognizes the legacies associated with the medium of photography as an interpretive site for generating new conventions and expanding fixed narratives therein. Konadu currently lives and works on Treaty One Territory (Winnipeg, Manitoba): the stolen lands of Anishinaabe, Métis, Cree, Dakota, and Oji-Cree Nations.

Nasrin Himada is curator at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art. They live and work on Treaty 1 Territory.

Aaron Moore is a Northern Irish artist currently based in Tkaronto, Canada. They have an interdisciplinary art practice and also work as an art installer, events producer, film programmer, curator and barista. They graduated from OCAD University in 2017 and currently work at Images Festival.

Here
Nasrin Himada

Upon engaging with Luther Konadu's installation, *Camerawork*, I immediately think of an entrance into a space that is created or offered; it feels like the space in which the image exists is also the space of its making. In the space of the installation, we are invited to look—an act often taken for granted as an audience. Yet here, the invitation to view the image's composition, framing, and construction feels far more direct. The viewer becomes part of the process through the simultaneous act of capture and construction. What are the parameters of this invitation? What is being questioned in this space when it comes to the relationship between construction and representation, between perception and position?

In Konadu's photography practice, the position of the viewer is as complicated as the image. The artist's installations present a type of workshop where images are being made, unmade, and re-made; contextualized and re-contextualized; formed and in formation as the "looking" is taking place. Through repetition, layering, cutting, collaging, and the shifting of placement, Konadu considers the possibilities inherent both in the perspective of the viewer and of the subject being viewed. In his installations, what is immediately noticeable is the structure of the space: these are not simply photographs, framed, and hung on walls. The images are indiscernible from the space that holds them, and from the space that conditions their existence. Both image and space form a dynamic that brings into view a community,

a collective. We're not looking as one, but as part of many. This shift in power position re-configures the set and setting, and engages our encounter with the image from a point of activation and re-orientation. We are not the only ones looking. We are complicit, but we are also empowered. We're in another place, one with the intention of doing away with the image as a placeholder for representation. Rather, the image, its apparatus, and the individuals depicted all become part of an ensemble orchestrating a gathering.

Konadu's practice has an architectural component that emphasizes the power of construction and design. He uses wood panels, tables, and other devices to interrupt the barrier of what would be inside or outside an image. The frame is therefore not exhausted, but multiplied. Some photographs are framed, but may hang low or on an angle. Other photographs are without a frame entirely but remain contained or held together by tape. Some fold, leaking onto the floor, or overlay to create the sensation of depth in space. The manipulation of framing and dimension creates a spatial effect leading the viewer's body to orchestrate movement differently, not a movement dependent on passive viewing, but one that is necessary for immersion and active looking.

Through the process, structure, apparatus, and materiality of the photograph, Konadu reveals an intricate reality-in-the-making as it is being captured. Capturing the moment through diptychs, polyptychs, text, and re-photography engages the viewer and the individual(s) depicted simultaneously, creating an association binding the viewer to the process rather than to the individuals in the images. In relation, rather than in opposition, an intimacy unfolds between the depicted figure(s) and the viewer.

Konadu presents a critique of photography's historical association with social documentary, breaking down its seemingly untouchable evidentiary qualities. The photograph as document archives and frames a historical narrative in which a scene, a memory, an event is memorialized; a subject is "known," presenting a view held from a dominant position. Rather, Konadu's showcasing of the process, building, construction, and design of a photograph constitute a collective imagining that invests in both the figure and the viewer's roles in composing an image. Konadu's process is one that prioritizes a communal effort as impetus for creating space and for transforming it. As in "Here Here", a text that Konadu at times includes in his installations which takes the tone of an incantation and gestures toward the processual—that which can be held in contradiction and gets worked through in order to image another world, is inseparable from form, and form is contextual, conceptual, and expressive of another image to come.



Luther Konadu and Aaron Moore In Conversation

The following is a written conversation between Luther Konadu and I, Aaron Moore. Luther was scheduled to have a solo exhibition entitled *Camerawork* at Hamilton Artists Inc. in Spring 2020, which unfortunately had to be cancelled due to COVID-19. While the artist talk between Luther and I in reference to his exhibition did not occur, we decided to make our conversation available in a different format. Following a few phone and FaceTime conversations, we exchanged emails and together produced the text below. These conversations took place as we individually travel and reside within the territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, the Anishinaabeg, the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Métis, the Musqueam, the Squamish and the Tsleil-Waututh. We extend thanks to these lands and their peoples, who live here now, and have lived here since time immemorial.

AM: Can you talk about your process around the current exhibition of your works at the Inc.?

LK: Well, the exhibition didn't happen so it's hard to talk about it since some of the processes you're asking about were to arise out of the exhibition. But I will say some of the intentions were to bring several new works along with older ones with a focus on some of the ways imaging technologies like a camera factor into truthmaking or permits fiction—broadly speaking.

AM: You talk about your practice being one continuous project. How do you see this iteration fitting into the narrative you are creating?

LK: I'd avoid using narrative to describe what I mean by continuous project. By "continuous", I mean, I don't work serially. I'm merely picking up from where I left off instead of starting a new project. So my intention for this exhibition was to focus on a different side of what I'm already working on prior to the exhibition. Which in this case, as I mentioned above, was some of the ways cameras come into play when forming a visual narrative.

AM: What does distancing your work from the term narrative do for how you approach making? Does it offer you more control over the camera's intrinsically produced visual narrative which you have identified and seek to subvert? What's left in the absence of narrative and understanding?

LK: I only said to avoid using narrative in relation to what I mean by "continuous" because it suggests that my work is following some plot or arc and that would be misleading. I honestly don't know what comes next.

AM: What happens then if a viewer reads a narrative in your body of works?

LK: I can't really control audiences' personal projections on my work. People will always read whatever they want into something even if it's not there.

AM: I'm interested in what it means to claim that you "don't know what comes next." Like you, my practice also consists of an extended singular project and asserting that I don't need to know what comes next has been a really important tool in claiming autonomy over my production. What does not-knowing do for you and how you go about creating?

LK: It's really just that. It doesn't "do" anything for me. I work intuitively. I never come in with a defined plan or any objectives. If I do know ahead, I probably won't do it or I'll likely deviate from it as I start. I just make choices as I start making the work, so I don't know that much ahead of time. That's part of why this is all ongoing and continuous. I later sit back, edit, and think about my choices.

AM: We talked about the ways you emphasise how your images come into existence by revealing the structure of the photograph. What do you think this allows us as an audience to do when viewing your images?



LK: To put it simply, it's a signal towards something rather expansive than the reduced frame one looks at.

AM: I have two questions that spring from the potentials of this signalling! I'm interested in how this signaling towards something more applies to how we understand images and their functions in our daily lives. During our conversations, you used the example of looking at the pictures that appear beside food items on restaurant menus or on Uber-eats and how we use them to contextualize our expectations. What are the expectations around image viewing that you're trying to dismantle by asking a viewer for an expansive approach to looking?

LK: Because of its strong evidential qualities, it (photography) can leave an unshakable impression on memory and it can be easy to conflate with lived experiences.

AM: I agree that the photograph can create this conflation, but I'm unsure as to whether that is a product of the apparatus itself or the means by which it is used and understood. I guess then my question is: what are the political ramifications of the postmodern assertion that every photograph is not what it appears to be?

LK: Photos always occlude and tell us only what to remember. So to resolve anything based on merely what appears is to miss out on what isn't shown. With that in mind, I don't know if there are any useful ramifications to saying a photo isn't what it appears to be.

AM: You use the word "unshakeable." Is this something you have personally experienced when looking at images?

LK: I think any first impression—through images or otherwise—are gateways to what comes after. They set expectations so we'll almost always have some hang-ups on what came first, sometimes to the detriment of what comes after.

AM: We talked about how through revealing the structures of your work aesthetically, a viewer can become aware of their own bodily relationship to the image. Can you talk about your installation practices and how you consider this relationship?

LK: I think above all it controls the context by which the images are seen and invites an active way of looking as opposed to a transactional one.

AM: Your work uses a variety of experimental installation methods which often reference what is happening in the images themselves. Does revealing the structure of the thing (the photo, the image, the work) to the audience expand the interaction with the work? How do you define a reduced and an expanded image?

LK: I used "signal" earlier and I think it's appropriate for what I mean. Because it's merely that: a suggestion to think elsewhere rather than outrightly "revealing the structure."

AM: I guess I'm wondering how we can define the border of the frame in order to expand beyond it? Or is that more of an internal understanding around the nature of photography's deployment?

LK: I think this is probably a question about materiality, which I continue to reinforce with my prints and installations.

AM: We talked quite a bit about the idea of representation, and that the term seems difficult as it can imply a totality. What do you think your photographs call a viewer to understand about the subjects of your images?

LK: I'll indicate here that the people in my work, including myself, aren't "subjects"; the work isn't about us per se. But more to your question, I hope nothing is "understood."

AM: If the people depicted in your photographs are not subjects, what are they? Objects? Props? Material on the surface of the image? Background information? I'm interested in how you define this. In my understanding, the history of photographic portraiture has been very much concerned with solidifying the power and authority of those in control of economic and cultural capital. Images inevitably provide us with information. In your photographs the race, genders, gazes, clothing, posing, positioning, and relationships between the people you picture all provide us with contexts that react against our internalized understandings, biases, and affective responses. Are you attempting to ensure that nothing is understood? If the work is not about the people in the images, what role do the people imaged serve in the production of the content?

LK: They (as well as myself) are part of the subject, not the subject. And the subject I'm always after is photography itself, particularly as it relates to portraiture and its attendant histories. When "subject" is often ascribed, it implies that concentration



is drawn to them or that which is depicted and in-focus. But I don't make images to focus on the individuals in my work. My work isn't autobiographical or meant to express something about the individuals imaged, their life story, internal psychology, personality, what their feelings are, etc. Photographs aren't enough to do that job without being porous to fiction.

AM: I guess more-so my question would be then: do you think it's possible to create an image that isn't porous to fiction?

LK: No.

AM: Is there a medium that really escapes that in your opinion?

LK: Nothing can replace experience.

AM: We spoke a bit about how this had come up in my practice. I had been making photo-based work about the political conflict in Northern Ireland and trying to understand the differences between the narratives I had grown up with and how those stories had been translated to a North American audience through news media. I was wrestling with the paradox of how a photograph is not what it depicts, yet photographs have been used by people belonging to marginalized identity groups as tools of resistance in many different ways. What specific histories related to portraiture are the subject of your work?

LK: Maybe more types of photographic portraiture than specific histories. That includes those for scientific study, expedition photography, photojournalism, cinema verities, social documentaries, etc. I try to make works that are broadly and symbolically in conversation with their inherent pursuit of objectivity on the places and people they depict.

AM: Where/how do the people you image fit into/stand outside of these histories?

LK: I suppose I'm not after objectivity per se. I'm interested in making images from within my own community as opposed to an outsider looking in for something exotic, which all these aforementioned types of photography have and continue to do.

AM: We talked about your work being a practice of asking a viewer to remain in a sustained state of not-deciding. What have you found this state does for our abilities to rework our own internalized narratives?

LK: I think you may have already answered your question. That state has the potential to displace whatever internalized narrative one may have; therefore arriving at that undecided place.

AM: But in attempting to open up a space for us to reconsider our internal logics, I think the content of your images just as much as their materiality prompts us with which ideas we should reposition. If you're asking a viewer to rethink how we conceptualize photography, we must also reconsider our relationships to what/who is in the photographs, and where/how they are presented. Can you talk about the aesthetic strategies you use that make the images help us to stay undecided?

LK: Collage, multiple overlay of images, jump-edits, re-photography, text/image pairings, I think they all create a useful sequential discontinuity and ellipses with what would otherwise be a single illusory image.

AM: On the phone we talked about how the recognition of feelings is a politically integral part of my practices, so in saying that: what would you hope your images cause a viewer to feel?

LK: I don't think about feelings or anticipate feelings from viewers in relation to my work. More so, I hope they become sites for thought.

AM: Is a thought not a feeling? Is a feeling not a thought? Can a thought not lead to a feeling? Can a feeling not provoke a thought? If they are really that different, what would you hope your images cause a viewer to think?

LK: All I'll say is that, I hope the viewer thinks about portraiture and its relation to photography differently, even if it's in the slightest.



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