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Challenges and questions encountered in preparing a photography exhibition about Durban's industrial suburbs.

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Introduction

Photographer Jenny Gordon (based at the School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University) and myself (Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal) have been working together on a photography project focused on three South Durban neighbourhoods located in the Durban harbour's heavily industrialised hinterland – Merebank, Wentworth and Lamontville – over some five years. Currently, we are engaged in the intensive process of mounting an exhibition aimed at presenting the photography and associated research, 'Breathing Spaces: Environmental Portraits of Durban's Industrial South'. This work has proved to be a complex, exciting, sometimes daunting process. An accelerating and exacting programme of producing the final photographic prints has to be balanced with conceptualizing and designing the exhibition as a whole, including associated workshops, while research aimed at producing text that will help place the photographs within a conversational context that explores senses of the past and the politics of the present continues.

One important area of discussion that I am not dealing with in this paper concerns our various understandings of how this photographic exhibition seeks to engage with ideas of the photographer as social or political commentator, and of how to negotiate the relationship between meaning and visual aesthetics. This will be a theme for later reflection and writing. For this seminar, I have decided to present a few of the challenges that we are encountering, all of which are involved with the politics of representation. My writing here is therefore meant as a 'thinking' piece written during a particular moment of our project's activities, that allows for discussion of the work-in-progress of mounting the exhibition. For a variety of practical and ethical reasons – I am still negotiating whether and how to exhibit various photographs that I would like to discuss - no photographs appear in this paper. Instead, a selection will be presented at the seminar.

I start with a quick synopsis describing key facets of the project and of the exhibition and associated activities. This is followed by a description, in broad strokes, of how we have decided different types of photographs to be arranged, so that the subsequent more detailed discussion of the decisions we have yet to make about the finer arrangement of photographs within this framework will make sense. I go on to outline issues that concern the choice and arrangement of photographs in the exhibition, that pertain to how the exhibition as a whole will engage with the politics representation and identity.

Our project has been constituted as an attempt at producing photographs in a way that is sensitive to dynamics of power and privilege between photographer and photographed, researcher and researched. Focusing on the interviews that I am currently conducting as part preparing text that will be used at the exhibition, I present several examples of how I am negotiating this aspect of our work. Finally, I also raise some questions with regards to an aspect our work that I have found difficult to grasp in its entirety. What are the different possibilities for a project of contemporary photography that is focused particular neighbourhoods, to represent and to reflect on both 'present' and 'past'? How should, and could, we tease aspects of 'history' into the visual and textual space of the exhibition? For my own on-going role in the project this is an important question, also given that our plans are to re-exhibit in other South African cities and to also base future publications on the exhibition.

Exhibition and associated activities – a brief overview

'Breathing Spaces: Environmental Portraits of Durban's Industrial South (Durban Art Gallery, July 12 - August 21) will combine panoramic landscape photographs and portrait photographs by Jenny Gordon with photographs taken by residents, who took part in workshops held by ourselves between 2002 and 2005. In addition the exhibition will include a number of family photographs sourced from residents, mostly studio portraits taken in the 1940s - 1990s. Gordon worked with local organisations and socially involved individuals as a way of opening up themes for her photography. As a result, the exhibition is intended as an exploration of what it means to live in an environment still strongly structured by the geographies of apartheid city planning, by poverty and in

which industrial pollution features strongly. The exhibition is meant to be a complex visual representation of lives in Durban's residential-industrial hinterland, a part of the city with which has remained peripheralised in touristic, popular images of Durban. The photographs will be complemented by extracts from interviews that seek to historicise and bring a range of personal and 'local' responses to the photographs into the space of the exhibition.

Hitherto, our exhibitions have been the end results of the photography workshops held over some three weeks during the July school holidays, have featured the work of participants, who have been teenagers from local schools and local environmental activists, home based care workers and other socially involved individuals. The exhibitions have also taken place in the local municipal libraries of the neighbourhoods where we have worked. All along, we planned that the exhibition dynamic would involve, so to speak, an outward spiral. In 2002 we ran a workshop in Austerville/Wentworth, the work was also exhibited. A year later, workshop participants were primarily from two neighbourhoods, Merebank and Wentworth, peripherally. We re-exhibited an expanded version of this workshop later that year in Wentworth, working with a core group of dedicated photographers – on this occasion, Jenny Gordon also showed some of her work. The following year (2004), we continued to work with this group of adults and teenagers, and took their exhibition to the Gender and Visuality conference held at the University of the Western Cape. In 2005, we ran a workshop-cum-exhibition in Lamontville, which had participants from all three areas (although the majority lived in Lamont). Throughout this period with the workshops as an important point of introduction, networking and collaborative work, Jenny Gordon visited Durban to continue her own programme of taking photographs. I also worked in all of these contexts as a teacher, researcher and also specifically in order to collect and weave family/personal photographs belonging to people living in the areas into the exhibitions. Our current exhibition in which all of the work is edited into one coherent presentation is also the first to take place in an art gallery, and in the city centre. It will not emerge from an immediately preceding workshop in the way that previous exhibitions have. It will show as many of Jenny Gordon's photographs as it does photographs by residents,

although the farmer's photographs will be exhibited in larger format and in a larger, adjacent exhibition space (see the discussion below). Apart from the fact that we are re-exhibiting the workshop-generated photographs however, we this culminating exhibition also shares some features with the previous, smaller exhibitions. As with all of our previous workshops – which featured the making of photographic albums – we are planning an art workshop in which a range of art and craft techniques will be used. This time however the plan is to make a banner, inspired by the exhibition's photography and exploring themes that participants see as relevant to the exhibition, from a variety of materials. Participants will include members of environmental clubs from local high schools and individuals belonging to various local community organizations. The banner will likely form part of a dramatic performance at the opening. The exhibition itself will also be complemented by an educational programme in the form of guided tours for local schools. Finally, we are organising a focused workshop series that will explore possibilities for auto-biographical and other creative writing inspired by the exhibition photographs, including the creative overlaps between life history and other interview approaches and authorship. Participants in this workshop will be residents from South Durban, including persons who introduced Gordon to themes for her photography and 'graduates' from the photographic workshops.

'Breathing Spaces' will take place in Durban Art Gallery's foyer area and one of its galleries. We are planning up a sizable selection of photographs, around one hundred, taken as part of the workshops that we in the foyer area. This first space that exhibition-goers will enter will contain all of the photographs were part of the exhibitions held at the municipal libraries. Many of these photographs will be presented in sub-sections each of which will feature the work of an individual who became part of a core group who participated in several workshops. These will be accompanied by brief self-introductions and statements as to how they see their role as photographers. A number of photographs will also be combined thematically, in order to present work by others who participated in the workshops. Family photographs, chosen from their home collections by workshop participants, will also feature. The photographs will be captioned as they were in previous exhibitions, by the photographers.

The gallery, which is a larger space, will feature Jenny Gordon's photographs, also combined with reproductions of personal photographs belonging to residents. The overall exhibition design is meant to establish the spatiality of the 'basin' area as a kind of visual grid against which other photographs are read. The walls will therefore feature photographs showing the residential-industrial landscape of the industrial basin and Lamontville from a variety of perspectives. Most of these will be panoramic photographs, some of which are several meters long.

In the middle of the exhibition space, on the floor, will be a photographic map showing Merebank, Wentworth, Lamont in relation to the harbour and neighbouring suburbs. A number of exhibition stands will be arranged throughout the gallery, and will have Gordon's portraits of people at home and photographs of individuals or groups of people in neighbourhood streets.

These will also often be complemented by selections of personal/family photographs. All photographs, including the panoramas, will have information-style captions, providing names and the location where the picture was taken, sometimes with some other details. A number of photographs will also have 'extended' captions in the form of quotes, often drawn from interviews with the people featuring in the photograph. The stands on which the photographs will be mounted are see-through wire-mesh screens, so that the photographs are meant to be 'read' against the wall-mounted landscape photographs surrounding them. Both exhibition spaces will also feature a number of 'comment tables' that invite visitors to respond to the exhibition via various questions. Working in collaboration with the South Durban Community and Environmental Alliance, we are also planning to have information about industrial pollution in the form of newspaper files, as well as, we hope, enlarged and laminated floor-mounted newspaper reports about his and other aspects of the area's recent history. Depending on the results of our art workshop – described below – this space may also feature a banner a fabric-based re-interpretation of the photographic exhibition and the 'messages' it seeks to convey.

Exhibition Design and the politics of place and identity

In January this year, Gordon and I spent several days choosing photographs for the exhibition from amongst what was by now a large number of photographs taken in South Durban. She also subsequently met with other photographers in order to further edit the choice of photographs for the exhibition. This process of choosing photographs has involved deciding which of the images are visually strong and compelling, and also whether and how they fit into the overall thematic of the project and unfolding exhibition. (It also led to the decision that a last, intensive bout of photo-taking had to happen in Lamontville, which then happened in February/March). This round of semi-final editing and designing of the exhibition involved trying out different ways in which the photographs could be arranged in relation to each other, both in terms of visual synergies and with regards to a process of articulating key themes for the exhibition.

Our design and editing decisions are based on the understanding that specific combinations of photographs would emphasise certain issues - make visual statements and be part of visual-textual arguments. If many photographic exhibitions keep written text to a minimum, ours is planned to privilege the visual, but to also have various forms of written text to contextualize the photographs – how these ascribe meanings to the visual images also has to be thought about carefully. But the arrangement of photographs themselves within the exhibition therefore is crucially involved with our understanding of how the exhibition should function as a form of visual social commentary, and how it could engage audiences with regards to specific socio-political issues. As we worked with the photographs, it became clear to us that we had to take very seriously how the ways in which we combined the photographs would translate into specific interventions with regards to the politics of representation and identity. Indeed, as a public exhibition mounted in Durban, it will inevitably be read within and against contemporary discourses in which ideas about raced, gendered and geographically located identities are at play.

Our first idea was that while the panoramic photographs would be on the walls of the exhibition space, the portraits and other photographs that are primarily focused on people had to be arranged according to the geography of South Durban. Our thinking at this stage was that the exhibition would not make visual and thematic sense if we ‘mixed up’ the photographs, also given our own experience of how these are places that, to differing degrees but in large part, function separately from each other. We therefore grouped them according to the neighbourhoods in which they were taken, and then arranged them into groups of photographs that cohered thematically for various reasons. However, the result seemed flat and somehow disappointing. Of course, the obvious and problematic result of this arrangement of the photographs was also to reproduce the racial geographies of apartheid in the space of the exhibition. For this reason, and anticipating visual and socio-political thematic synergies that could make for a much more exciting and challenging exhibition, we decided to dispense entirely with this plan, and to grasp the more daunting challenge of building an exhibition that invites viewers to explore a photographic arrangement that works strongly with photographic aesthetics. That is, the arrangement of photographs would seek to make present the various of social/political concerns and interests that had fuelled the photographic project and that had emerged or unfolded as we taught the workshops and as Jenny Gordon worked with people in order to take the photographs. At the same time, the patterning of the images into a whole would respect the potential of still photographs to communicate as often complex *visual* texts – as multi-layered framings of a particular time, place and person that could be placed next to, opposite or away from each other in order to suggest synergies or contrasts, to build arguments or suggest contradictions. The layers of meaning would be emphasized, teased out and engaged with or even disputed via the written text/quotes. This is work that is still in progress, and that will be finalized during the last intensive bout of work as the exhibition is mounted.

The question of how this exhibition will engage with South African discourses about race is obviously important. By virtue of the geographical delineation of our project, we had in fact already made a choice that limits the possible scope of our engagement. At the start we decided to work in the industrial basin area, which was designated, according to

apartheid policy, as living space for persons not classified as 'white'. We have reviewed this decision at times, and stayed with our commitment to focus in the primarily working-class areas of 'the basin' and not to, for example, cross the ridge that separates Wentworth and Merebank from the scenic, historically more privileged spaces of the Bluff. As we saw it, questions of raced identity would not be something specifically investigated by our research project, neither in the photography nor with regards to associated interviews. (Of course, our projects did engage consciously with the politics of raced identity, by virtue for example, of how we structured out cumulative programme of workshops as involving people across the old apartheid racial boundary lines between Merebank, Wentworth and Lamontville). At times during the course of our research, we have made brief and as yet incomplete attempts to extend our photography into adjacent, formerly white-designated working-class areas. This because the area that is strongly affected by industrial pollution follows the path of the pipelines that carry petroleum products from the refineries to the harbour, so that there is a ribbon of the residential area formerly classified as white that is also vulnerable to pollution, and a – harbourside neighbourhood that is particularly affected. In the longer term, we are plan that for subsequent showings of the exhibition (hopefully in Grahamstown and Cape Town, in 2008) we may follow the path of pipeline Tara Road to Ocean View, for a series of portraits that includes historically white individuals also affected by industrial pollution.

For this exhibition, we have decided to combine the photographs in ways that explore commonalities and contrasts amongst all of them and that deliberately scrambles the racial geography whilst also drawing some attention to history of race-designated 'group areas' through written text. We will still show the vistas of the basin on the walls of the gallery - images that may be read to speak volubly about the history of differentially allocated housing and residential space . In so doing, we hope to avoid pigeon-holing individuals according to the problematic ascriptions of identity that privilege ideas about race and place.

How exactly this will be made to work in the exhibition, however, is a matter that we are still working out. Related themes that have emerged as important in this process are those

of gender and generation. We have, for example, identified 'masculinity' as one broad theme that will structure which photographs we present next to each other, and also how we combine the how to combine several of Gordon's portraits of men with photographs from personal/family collections. While most people photographed are from working-class backgrounds, these are also portraits of people who could be seen to differ from each other in terms of their level of economic security, education and social status. Given Gordon's efforts to take 'environmental portraits' that represent individuals in ways that do not strip them of complexity and make any simple suggestions as to who they may be, this will hopefully be part of an effort to open up reflection and conversation about male identities. Certainly, a number of the old studio and other portraits from personal collections also allow for an exploration of male self-presentation to the camera.

Another set of photographs that will likely be arranged as a group will concern the experience of being a girl, and indeed different stages of women's lives. Yet another may concerns community initiatives to care for elderly people. It is possible that we could also place a series of photographs, taken in the various neighbourhoods, of elderly people in their living rooms, with personal/family photographs on the walls. We are still to decide whether it makes sense to place together photographs taken of families living in informal settlements, or who are faced with severe poverty – themes of 'gender' and 'generation' is likely to rather determine where these photographs are placed. Because the exhibition attempts to highlight the severe effects of industrial pollution on people's everyday lives, another set of photographs that we are planning to exhibit together are portraits of people, most of them living in Merebank and Wentworth, who have chronic respiratory illness, cancer and skin conditions that are caused or exacerbated by industrial pollution. These would also be complemented with family photographs from the subjects' personal collections.

With regards to two sets of photographs however, we feel that the built environment in which people live is so specifically a left-over of apartheid, and so powerfully continues to shape the contemporary experience of residents, that it is important to present these as sub-themes in themselves. The first of these are photographs taken at the council-owned

flats commonly called ‘The Barracks’ on Tara Road, Wentworth, and which have been the centre of drawn-out controversy as to where people living in what was designated as temporary accommodation more than thirty years ago would be relocated. The second group of photographs was taken at the ‘Wema’ migrant labour hostels on the periphery of Lamontville. We were introduced to the hostels as a subject for Jenny Gordon’s photography by Lamont residents who have been working with women living in the hostels on plans for small business co-operatives. In both these cases, it is important that we engage with the specialities that structure people’s lives, both in terms of visual representation through photography and with regards to how text that accompanies the pictures engages with the politics of space.

Text and image in the exhibition –exploring the possibilities of interview-based and historical research focused on photography

One aspect of our work also relates to a topic that I have found challenging to grasp and think through in its entirety has been - the role of ‘history’ and of my own role as ‘historian’ in the project. At the start of the project, we conceptualized clear roles for ourselves – of photographer and teacher of photography, and historian. I envisaged myself as primarily involved in locating and copying family photographs, and conducting life history interviews exploring how these pictures were part of, and could be made part of, the dynamics of remembrance. However, as we developed the project, Jenny Gordon and I worked closely together with regards to her photography. I was centrally involved in much of the social networking and planning that preceded visits to take photographs. The ‘contemporary’ photography – both Gordon’s own photography and the workshops - took centre stage in the project, with the copying of personal photographs as an associated activity. I have been acutely aware of the fact that lack of archival and other modes of research into relevant local histories limits the possible development and direction of the project as a whole, also the layering of histories into the space of the public exhibition. However, because of the sheer volume and complexity of work involved in the production of photographs involved in the project, I decided that important aspects of historical research would have to be left to a later stage, and that

more extensive work necessarily belongs to subsequent complementary projects, after the emergence of the body of photographic work. Meanwhile, I also became fascinated with the possibilities of engaging in 'conversations' about Jenny Gordon's photographs as much as the personal/family photographs, and with how experimentation with how to explore the meanings that people could make of these photographs could contribute to text that would accompany photographs at exhibitions.

Currently, I am preparing process of preparing text that will form part of the exhibition, and attempt to explore how the photographs are about the past, or how the exhibition can engage with local histories. It is the role of interviews that form a large part of this work that I wish to discuss here, by attempting to sketch, tentatively, the approach as to how to explore possible ways of engaging people in conversations about photographs that I have been working out for myself. How I engage with the dynamics of remembrance and with ideas about history still have to be teased out considerably, but my outline here should provide a basis for discussion about this.

I have been conducting interviews specifically in order to 'produce' texts that may be used as quotes that accompany photographs at the exhibition, although these are certainly done with the idea of a longer project that could involve other combinations of text and image with more analytical and reflective future writing in mind. The interviews are being done as part of research about how the people who feature in Jenny Gordon's photographs, who live near where she took the photographs, or those who introduced her to subjects for her photographs, can be engaged in conversations that seek to explore how they put into words ideas about or responses to a photographic image. As a parallel and closely linked project, I have also conducted similar interviews with regards to personal/family photographs.

For someone used to following a relatively non-directive and often circuitous approach to conducting life history interviews in previous projects of social history, it has been a strange experience to engage in interviews aimed at, with regards to the present stage of work, producing 'usable text' for a public exhibition. In the first place and especially in

the period close to the actual exhibition, the imminence of this event has been a presence during interviews, because we have always sought to explain the exhibition, also discussing how we want to use the interviewee's comments as text accompanying the photographs.

'We', because as I worked out a strategy for talking with people about the photographs, I found that it was far more possible to do so if I worked with research assistants or, more accurately, research interlocutors. I have continued to conduct some interviews on my own, but depending on the situation and the history of how the image was taken, I have also worked with co-interviewers/assistants. I have worked with different people in each of the three neighbourhoods, almost always some of the same people who had played an important role in introducing Jenny Gordon to themes and people for her photography. At the stage of taking the photographs, and now with regards to conducting interviews about the photographs, Mrs Perumal from Merebank, Jabulile Ncgobo from Lamontville and George Ruiters from Wentworth have been invaluable as co-researchers, guides and assistants. At any one interview, they have worked with me to help explain the purpose of the exhibition and of the research – in this regard, the fact that they have been involved in the project from its early stages have been important.

Thus, drawing on her community work and her involvement in medical research projects with regards to the effect of pollution on health, Mrs Perumal took us to a number of homes in Merebank from 2003, helping us negotiate permission to take photographs of people who were chronically ill because of high levels of pollution. She had also worked extensively with Jenny Gordon as to how she could show the proximity of residential homes and industry. Jabulile Ncgobo had introduced us to various social networks in Lamontville, including local organizations involved in the care of elderly and chronically ill people. Now, with regards to interviewing, we returned to some of the same homes in order to arrange discussions about the photographs. George Ruiters drew on his experience as volunteer HIV/Aids counselor and provider of home based care support when working with Jenny Gordon in and around Wentworth, and I have worked with him when going back to discuss photographs with some of the people that Jenny then

photographed, but also with regards to a larger number of photographs taken in Wentworth/Austerville. This work has often involved has been a process of (re) introductions, perhaps also of choosing and borrowing family photographs to copy for use at the exhibition, and of discussing Jenny Gordon's photograph and/or the family photographs.

The kinds of questions asked about the photographs have varied, often according to the reasons why they were taken in the first place, but also as part of working out and adapting according to the dynamics of the particular interaction what kinds of conversations one could have about photographs. In addition, the interviews have included negotiating a range of issues to do with the politics of representation and with related questions of informed consent. Almost every interview focused on a photograph by Jenny Gordon has brought to the fore, variously, compelling questions about the relationship between photographer and photographed, and led to different ways of exploring, in conversation, the image as a document that may prompt debate about political or social questions, reflection about personal circumstance and relationships, a dynamic of remembrance, or questions about who chooses to exhibit a photograph and why. Interviews in which family photographs were talked about also brought a range of responses, including suggesting ways in which the exhibition could explore an interweaving of personal, familial and 'local' history. As I have worked together with 'research interlocutors', it has also been important to try reflect on the unfolding dynamics of the working relationships that we are forging, not least because I am all the people that are working with me in this capacity have been involved in the making of aspects of the photography project over time.

How all of this comes together at the exhibition remains to be seen. Hopefully, the discussion can provide useful critical inputs and ideas.