

**Please do not quote. This is our first academic paper about Jenny Gordon's photographs and the 'Breathing Spaces' exhibition. We are currently thinking through how various of themes that are introduced in this paper can be interrogated more deeply in further collaborative writing, and are planning to do so by again working with the format of a conversation.**

**Photographic portraiture, neighbourhood activism and apartheid's industrial legacy: Reflections on the *Breathing Spaces* exhibition.<sup>1</sup>**

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*Breathing Spaces: Environmental portraits of Durban's Industrial South* was shown in Durban Art Gallery in July 2007 and traveled to Cape Town's Iziko Gallery of Good Hope at The Castle in January 2009. The exhibition was the culmination of a project that was launched in 2002 and that focussed on three adjacent neighbourhoods, Wentworth, Merebank and Lamontville.

From the start, our aim was to build a composite portrait of the Durban harbour's residential-industrial hinterland, an area that bears the strong imprint of apartheid-era planning and a longer history of racial segregation. Lamontville, Durban's oldest African township, was established in 1934. Today it is next to an industrial area, Mobeni, and across the highway from most of Merebank and from Wentworth, where the stacks of the Engen oil refinery towers over surrounding council flats and houses. Other large industry includes the Sapref Oil refinery and the Mondi paper mill. Numerous smaller petro-chemical companies also add to the high levels of pollution of Durban's industrial basin. Many elderly residents have childhood memories of growing up in a semi-rural environment of wetlands, market gardening and relatively dispersed factories before the arrival of petrochemical industry from the early 1950s.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, as the Durban municipality realized its dreams for a racially segregated city and implemented Group Areas legislation, Wentworth was established right next to Durban's first refinery. This high density 'Coloured' working-class township was separated from the 'White', seaside neighbourhood the Bluff by a natural ridge and by thick bush, and from Merebank (declared an 'Indian' group area in 1958) by a single street.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is to be published in the journal *Kronos* in 2009, together with a photographic essay comprising a selection of Jenny Gordon's photographs and accompanying text from the 'Breathing Spaces' exhibition.

<sup>2</sup> For a longer history of industrial growth in South Durban, see Stephen Sparks, 'Playing at Public Health: The Search for Control in South Durban 1860-1932', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, volume 20, 2002. See also S Sparks, "Stink, maar uit die verkeerde rigting': Pollution, Politics and Petroleum Refining in South Africa, 1948-1960' (unpublished M.A dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2004. See also Louise Torr, 'Lamontville, Durban's Model Village: The Realities of Township Life, 1934-1960', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 1987.



The Breathing Spaces exhibition at The Good Hope Gallery (January 2009).

Racial and industrial zoning in South Durban also meant that many market gardeners of Indian descent lost their land.<sup>3</sup>

The starkly persistent geography of apartheid therefore drew us to choose this area for a photographic project, but we also chose to work in this part of Durban because it has a strong history of environmental activism.<sup>4</sup> The southern industrial basin became a flashpoint in the fight for environmental justice from the 1990s, as the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance placed pressure on the main culprits – Engen, Sapref and Mondi – and claimed new spaces for civic intervention in order to reduce pollution. Urban planning has remained a

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<sup>3</sup> Brij Maharaj details the Durban City Council's 'critical role in the formulation, refinement and implementation of the Group Areas Act' in 'The 'Spatial Impress' of the Central and Local States: The Group Areas Act in Durban'. Published in David Marshall Smith, ed, *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa* (Routledge, 1992). Histories of the implementation of racial segregation of South Durban include D Scott's 'Creative Destruction: Early Modernist Planning in the South Durban Industrial Zone, South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29: 1, 235-259. See also her doctoral study, 'The Rise and Fall of Clairwood and District', (University of Natal, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Environmental activists from these neighbourhoods sometimes trace the beginning of their struggles against industrial pollution to the 1960s, with their opposition gathering force during the 1980s, although Stephen Sparks traces a longer history of local residents' efforts to draw the municipality's attention to high levels of air pollution in 'Stink maar uit die verkeerde rigting'. See also B Freund, Brown and Green in Durban: The Evolution of Environmental Policy in a Post-Apartheid City, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, 4, 2001; D Wiley, S Root and B Peek, Contesting the Urban-Industrial environment in South Durban in a period of Democratisation and Globalisation in B Freund and V Padayachee (Eds), *Durban Vortex: South African City in Transition*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2002.

matter of vigorous and often bitter contestation, as Durban's eThekweni municipality has tended to be responsive to industry's desire for more land.<sup>5</sup>

*Breathing Spaces* was the culmination of an outward spiral of public presentations that included exhibitions in South Durban itself. We introduced ourselves to each neighbourhood by holding photographic workshops during the mid-year school holidays. Exhibitions that showed photographs by workshop participants were held in the municipal libraries of the respective neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup> The workshops created opportunities for Jenny to visit participants at home and take photographs. People who agreed to be photographed were given copies of their portraits – which then prompted neighbours and friends to participate. We asked activists and community workers to introduce us to matters of local concern, and to people whom Jenny should photograph. We also continued to work with a few volunteers from local organizations and community-based projects in-between workshops. They commented on Jenny's photographs in viewing sessions and helped to facilitate interviews with residents about the photographs, thus shaping the project in important ways. We chose the Durban Art Gallery for its proximity to public transport networks and because the gallery is part of a municipal complex of museums that is very well attended by black and working-class Durbanites. The opening of the exhibition at DAG was well attended by Durban South residents, and we arranged transport, particularly for people who had consented to be photographed and who had made their family photographs available for the exhibition.

The exhibitions of 2007 and 2009 were visually complex arrangements of photographs that combined different genres of photography: Jenny's portrait and landscape photographs were presented together with reproductions of personal photography sourced from residents, and photographs by participants from the workshops were also included. The backbone of both exhibitions was Jenny's photographs. Large panoramic landscape photographs (1.2 to 8 meters long) were displayed on the gallery walls. Portraits of people from the various neighbourhoods were arranged on metal exhibition stands (see-through wire grids in metal frame surrounds) positioned throughout the galleries. On some of

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, D Wiley, S Root and B Peek, *Contesting the Urban-Industrial environment in South Durban in a period of Democratisation and Globalisation* in B Freund and V Padayachee (Eds), *Durban Vortex: South African City in Transition* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2002); S (Bobby) Peek, 'Double-speak in Durban; Mondi, Waste Management and the Struggles of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, in *Environmental Justice in South Africa* (Ohio University press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> The first workshop was held in Austerville/Wentworth, in 2002. High school students from local schools participated. The second workshop (2003) involved high school students from Merebank and also members of civic organisations and community health volunteers from Wentworth. The majority of participants in the third workshop were high school students from Lamontville. Community health volunteers and teenagers from Wentworth and Merebank also participated. We discuss our approach to teaching the workshops in 'The means to turn the social key: The South Durban Photography Project's workshops for first-time photographers (2002-2005). Published in Naydene de Lange et al (eds), *Putting People in the Picture: Visual Methodologies for Social Change* (Sense Publishers, 2008).

the stands, Jenny's photographs were arranged together with reproductions of family photographs, mostly old studio portraits, sourced from residents, and other stands carried only family photographs. The work of participants in the photographic workshops was also included as part of the exhibitions. Both exhibitions also included a large and detailed photographic map of South Durban, placed on the floor of the gallery, together with newspaper articles that documented industrial pollution.

Descriptive text for each photograph identified people by name. A number of photographs were also accompanied by extracts from interviews, in which people who feature in portraits, their neighbours or family members, responded to questions that attempted to explore personal meaning, memory and issues of representation. The exhibition at the Durban Art Gallery in particular provided ample opportunity for visitors to write comments. Tables (and oil drums positioned throughout the exhibition) had books and large sheets of paper - these had questions for visitors about how they responded to the photographs and to the exhibition as a whole. This approach prompted extensive written comments and discussion. Many responses were from residents of South Durban and surrounding areas.

The dialogue that follows is not a conventional interview, but has been constructed from written and recorded conversations between ourselves. This format allows us to retain our individual voices and to explore our various understandings of the project and the exhibitions. We chose to focus this discussion on Jenny's photographs and her approach to photography, as opposed to a focus on the reproductions of personal photographs and on photographs by workshop participants. This emphasis is also reflected in the selection of actual photographs.

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MdT: When we started working together on this project in 2002, I remember tramping around Wentworth with you over those first weeks, and how intense the sessions of photography always were. You would be completely focused, and spend hours in a trance of concentration, while we also spoke to people, explaining the project and what you as photographer were doing. I've often thought about how you seem to attain a different sort of calm and focus behind the camera. But what is it that attracts you?

JG: In retrospect I think photography gave me an opportunity to discover the world. I came from a fairly sheltered background and using a camera meant

going out into the world and discovering it for myself. It was a first-hand education and it remains a way of trying to understand people and society. It was during my second year at university in 1976 that I started doing photography. The previous year, I had definitely become much more aware of what was happening in the country and I was completely horrified and wanted to find a way not only to deal with it psychologically but also to communicate about it. In that first year of studying photography, I began to discover that people were my main interest. In the beginning I only had a 35mm camera. I then got my Rollicord – it's a square format camera and you look down into it to focus. It was a good fit as it enabled me to engage, talk and relate to people more easily, as my face wasn't behind the camera. I think that people can pick up if you are interested in them and their lives. Diane Arbus – who also changed to a similar format camera - once said that 'the camera is a license, people want to be paid that much attention'<sup>7</sup>

MdT: Why do you think this is so, that you're primarily a photographer of people? When you first worked as a photographer in the late 1970s and 1980s, even though you wanted to record what was happening in the country, you didn't do hard news. In our past conversations, you've also identified yourself as a 'humanist', not so much in a specific ideological sense of the term, but to emphasise that when you take photographs and work out a new project, you do think about contemporary injustices and how you could engage with these.

JG: When I first started out as a photographer I was a student and not working for anybody. My first real introduction to photography was when I did a project for my fine arts photography course. I accompanied student doctors who were working in the shack settlement Crossroads outside Cape Town, and who suggested that I photographed them at work. I started by taking pictures of the doctors. But I soon gravitated towards taking photographs of people sitting in their homes. I was always more interested in people and their living situations rather than action. This was also when I started to give copies of pictures to the people photographed by me.

I like the idea that 'humanism is inseparable from art, however defined and created', which is what Bill Jay writes about David Hurn in his book *On Being a Photographer*.<sup>8</sup> I also think that passion must also be part of one's art. You must have passion for the subjects that you're photographing. David Hurn says that for him it's not simply about 'the craft of photography', but that 'photography is inextricably linked with life, the photographer is not invisibly behind the camera...'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Doon Arbus 1972. *Going where I have never been* [film]

<sup>8</sup> David Hurn and Bill Jay, *On Being a Photographer: a Practical Guide* (Lenswork Publishing, 1997), p12.

<sup>9</sup> David Hurn and Bill Jay, *On Being a Photographer*, p, 33.

The more I take photographs and teach photography, the more the process enthralls me. The philosophy of experiential learning which I apply in my teaching is also relevant to my own photography. I'm not obsessive about the technical aspects of photography for their own sake, but I am concerned about them to the degree that they support or convey the meaning of an image. I prefer a camera format that gives adequate detail, and I very rarely use wide angle or long focal length lenses, because I feel that these distort 'reality' in ways that can appear clever but do not necessarily add anything of genuine significance to an image. I do think that anyone can learn how to take technically proficient photographs, but I think you need a lot of passion to make both a technically skilful picture and a meaningful one. I am very concerned with connecting 'on a human level' with the subject of the photographs and with the 'feelings' that I am trying to communicate.

MdT: When I met you in the late '90s, you were teaching photography in workshops for children from a squatter camp near Hout Bay, Masiphumelele. Your previous, larger projects had all been about communities in one way or another – I'm thinking of your photographs of the Mai Mai Market in central Johannesburg and of people living in Troyeville. It's interesting to think about how our project relates to your previous work and how you also developed new ways of doing your photography. When we started to work together in 2002, we decided to put together a project that would involve photography workshops for first-time photographers who lived in the areas near the refineries – we thought of high school students as the participants. You would also be taking portraits, and I would find and make reproductions of family photographs. In the first few years of the project, I used to refer to an 'outsider', 'insider' dynamic when I explained the project to academic colleagues. I contrasted your position as a photographer from out of town, who visited for days or weeks at a time, and I also contrasted your portraits to those of the residents who were taking photographs as part of the workshops, of their own lives and their own neighbourhoods. But the different parts of the project became more and more interrelated, and we both worked in South Durban for several years. From my perspective as an academic, you pushed both of us to work with activists and community workers from various communities over an extended period of time.

JG I have always seen myself as 'other' and not as belonging to a particular group. I grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood, but as my family was not traditional or religious, I didn't fit in. And therefore when I work in one or other place as a photographer, I don't photograph people because I see them as 'other' or as different from myself. For me working within various communities and not going in with preconceived ideas about what I'm going to achieve and what the community is like is very important. Most of my work has been about communities, rather than individuals. Most of my teaching has also been in community situations, but it's only with the Durban project that my interests or passions started working together. The period of my life which had a big influence on me was the 1970s. I was very influenced by the ideas of transferring

your skills and the concept of each-one-teach-one, and that I should avoid - horror of horrors – my own personal navel gazing.

Photographer Robert Frank once wrote in a grant application that ‘the project I have in mind is one that will shape itself as it proceeds, and is essentially elastic’.<sup>10</sup> For me this describes the learning journey that one embarks on when one starts a photographic project. I’m not working totally instinctively, I do plan, but I know that things could change at any moment. You’ll remember that we looked for grassroots activists from the beginning, but this became more and more central to my way of working as I went on. If one starts work in a community as a new person, one has a really simple view of a place. One has to talk to people who’ve lived and worked in the area for years - they can know it in all its complexity. It was you who approached local organizations for volunteers who could be invited to participate in our photographic workshops.

MdT: That’s how we came to know George Ruiters (community health care volunteer) and Lorna McDonald, whose son was in our first workshop and who later participated herself as a member of Women of Wentworth. Also Oliver Meth, who was still at school and very passionate about children’s rights and also the environment, who approached us in the Austerville municipal library, at the first exhibition of photographs from our first workshop. And once we started working in Merebank we got to know Mrs Perumal, who took us to people in her neighbourhood who were suffering from asthma while telling us about her work as an anti-pollution and community health activist. And at our first exhibition in Lamontville, we met Jabu Ngcobo, who then became very involved with helping us get to know the problems faced by people in Lamontville and especially the minority of women living in the migrant labour hostels.

JG: They actually took me to places that for them were symbolic of problems that people in their neighbourhood faced and that they felt needed to receive public attention. George would be talking about the problem of living with Aids and poverty, while living in an area which was polluted. So as it evolved, the project was not only about a partnership with you, it was also one with George, with Oliver and a lot of other people. For me one of the most inspiring aspects of the photographic project was getting to know all the community activists – people who were very often doing community work without getting paid. They all were unofficial social workers within their own communities and very aware of the need to educate people from their neighbourhoods – which is also what drew them to learn how to take photographs and to participate in the project.

MdT: Let’s look at some of the photographs that resulted from these partnerships. I’m interested in what comes to mind when you look at them now. It was Mrs Perumal who took you to the people who live a few hundred metres from the Engen and Sapref oil refineries, and from the Mondi paper plant, and who suffer from chronic asthma. And George Ruiters took you to Latasha

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<sup>10</sup> Geoff Dyer *The Ongoing Moment*, (Pantheon Books, 2005), pp5-6.

Webster's home in Austerville, because of his conviction that her chronic illness is also caused, or made much worse, by the pollution.

JG: When I first started taking portraits of people who had chronic asthma, I worried quite a lot about how I could communicate their experience, and often it was their idea to hold their pumps. Either they had them on them or they would get them because they were a symbol of their problems, I suppose. I hope that the photograph captured the feeling I had when I was there and taking it - Mrs Reebee was wheezing, she was quite frail but she was in her own home, in her own space (see Plate Four of photographic essay)<sup>11</sup>. What also interested me was that she insisted on being photographed in her pyjamas while her daughter wanted her to change. I had a feeling that she wanted me to communicate her ill health, her asthma. I don't know if it comes across that this is a woman from within her own culture, from one of the many South African cultures. She didn't speak much English. She lived in an area where she had her own friends and family, in her own small world I suppose.

I had heard about Latasha Webster long before George took me to meet her. A lot of people talked about the fact that she lived in an area so close to the pollution, which made her illness harder to deal with. I had a long conversation with Latasha about her illness when I took her portrait (Plate Five). She showed me all her medication, going through what the different things were for. On top of everything else she suffered from asthma. And when I looked at the photograph afterwards I was very interested in the sympathetic and concerned look that her cousin was giving her, while Latasha was talking about her illnesses.

MdT: These were situations in which you were taken to family homes. We entered a very different context when we explained to Jabu Ngcobo that to our thinking, your photographs had still not dealt with social problems in Lamontville. She introduced us to the minority of women who lived in the Wema (S.J. Smith) migrant labour hostel and were trying to improve the living conditions for women and children in the hostel. When we went to the Wema (S.J. Smith) hostel, the environment was much less familiar to us both I think, and Jabu Ngcobo was careful to observe the protocol, to arrange and ask for permission to take the photographs, and to help us find from Lamontville those who worked with the women's group, to introduce us and take us around. But I don't recall any difficulty with explaining why we were there with you starting to take photographs.

JG: The women wanted us to expose what was happening to them. I remember how Zanele Ngcobo took us to the kitchen and wanted us to photograph the conditions, and at the same time she was talking to us about how they needed their own women's hostel. When I was taking these pictures, what I saw and heard made me think about how important it is having your own small space, never mind a house. When one is doing a portrait, it can also involve

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<sup>11</sup> The photographic essay will be published together with this paper in Kronos and for the purposes of this seminar it is available as a separate document.



representing people's spaces, and these people really didn't have their own space. Even though it's totally a man's world my focus was on the women's reality. Their situation came across as so overwhelmingly bleak. I think it was the most dire of any situation in the three areas that I photographed. What stands out in my mind was one young woman whom I photographed, who said that you've got to spread your legs to get a bed in the hostel.

Although these two portraits were both taken at Wema, what was fascinating to me was that in the case of Dudu Dlamini, who was lying on the bed which is where she slept with her boyfriend, the space of that very full hostel room was highly personalised Rose Thabethe had a family picture up on her wall, a personal picture rather than magazine pictures (see Plates Ten and Eleven, Photographic Essay) She had a room of her own, a family room, although she still had very little privacy. There was no privacy for women in the communal bathroom. Dudu Dlamini was actually thrilled to have her photograph taken. On the other hand, it was very important to Rose Thabethe to convey the difficulties of living in the hostel and was very concerned that we exposed the issues. She was discussing this at the time when I took the portrait, and she also took us around. She was part of the committee that was trying to change conditions and to get their own hostel block.

MdT: You've also often talked about the conundrum of what genre of photography best describes what you do, whether you are a social documentary photographer, or what sort of portraits you take, and how your photography differs from much of photojournalism.

JG: I love what photographer David Hurn says about being a photographer: 'I'm a photographer obviously. My chosen tool for understanding life and communicating the results of the search to others is the camera'. But he goes on to say that 'the term photographer covers such a broad spectrum of activities that is not specific and therefore useful enough to act as the verbal shorthand. Just what type of photographer are we talking about?'<sup>12</sup> During the 1970s and 80s, photojournalists used to say to me that I was a fine art photographer and fine art photographers would tell me that I was a photojournalist. I think that to a great extent in the world today these two approaches have merged. A lot of photojournalism is exhibited in art galleries and sometimes art photography extends into photojournalism. Think of Jodi Bieber's latest exhibition, 'Real Beauty'<sup>13</sup>. It explored how women see themselves - you could call it both fine art and photojournalism. Because it was an investigation, an enquiry, a documentary, but it was also printed really large and put up in a gallery. They were portraits of women in their underwear, and interviews with them on how they saw themselves.

Hurn also says that he objects to being called a photojournalist because the term has gained unfortunate connotations: 'the photojournalist' he says, 'is too often

<sup>12</sup> David Hurn and Bill Jay, *On Being a Photographer*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Jodie Bieber, 'Real Beauty', The Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, November-December 2008.

associated with a foot in the door, the camera in the face, aggression, without much knowledge or concern about what the subject is or how the image will be used or any regard for issues of ethics or aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

MdT: In other words, the question of photojournalism or fine art photography and how these relate to your own photography isn't only about where the photographs are printed or exhibited – as part of a story in the pages of a newspaper, or defined as aesthetic objects in an art gallery. I remember that when we tried to explain to people what the project was all about, you would often emphatically say that you were not a photojournalist, that you were not taking pictures for a newspaper story. We would explain that you needed permission for taking the photographs and that we were committed to giving people copies of their photographs, and we also explained about the exhibition. It seems that you think of photojournalists as working at a different pace and often not negotiating with people, explaining to people where the photograph will end up and to what purpose?

JG: I don't see myself as the kind of photojournalist who is OK with not spending time or asking people for permission. I would personally never photograph someone who didn't want me to and I like to find out as much as I possibly can about a situation. These issues of negotiating whether one can take a photograph and explaining its intended use are of great concern to me. David Levi-Strauss puts it very well in his book *Between the Eyes*:

When one, anyone, tries to represent someone else, to 'take their picture' or 'tell their story', they run headlong into a minefield of real political problems. The first question is: what right have *I* to represent *you*? Every photograph of this kind must be a negotiation, a complex act of communication. As with all such acts, the likelihood of success is extremely remote, but does that mean it shouldn't be attempted? <sup>15</sup>

He then quotes Brecht who argued that '(i)n art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success'.<sup>16</sup> You can't talk for somebody but you can try to represent them through your art. Levi-Strauss says that 'a documentary practice that tries to avoid the difficulties of such communication is not worthy of the name'...<sup>17</sup> It's never straight forward, there are always unequal power relations. As you know, we took a lot of care and discovered through doing exhibitions in the community how few people understood what an exhibition was. In fact, I think is very interesting that most people in the communities where we worked only saw photography in one of three ways. It was either through photographs of family, or for younger people photographs of them and their friends, or there was

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<sup>14</sup> David Hum and Bill Jay, *On Being a Photographer*, p38.

<sup>15</sup> David Levi-Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (Aperture 2005, p8) .

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

newspaper photography. So people sometimes struggled to understand the context in which we planned to use the photographs.

MdT: Is it also that you more or less want to photograph people like they want to be photographed? Or so that they would not be alienated when looking at the photographs of themselves?

JG Yes. In my experience it's very different photographing middle-class compared to working-class people. These were working-class areas, but especially in Merebank there were some well-to-do professionals. Whenever I have photographed middle-class people of whatever race, it's been much more difficult. I mean look at the trouble I had photographing middle-class people in Merebank, how suspicious people were of what I was doing. I think it's a very important thing, the reactions of different classes of people to being photographed and how middle-class people are very wary and are scared of you revealing something. During the opening of the exhibition in the Durban Art Gallery, a few people from Merebank came up to me and said they finally understood what I was doing and were now willing to be photographed, which was a bit sad.

MdT: I want to ask you about the interaction between yourself and the subjects of your photography as part of this project, when you are actually taking a photograph. You quoted Hurn as dismissing an attitude of 'the camera in the face'.

JG: You also hear or read a lot about photographers blending into the background, and being hidden behind their cameras. I do try to be as unobtrusive as possible, but I'm very aware that people are conscious that I am taking photographs of them. If they start talking to someone else I don't interfere or try to talk myself. Another aspect of my interaction is that I am totally involved in the process of making the photograph. I have learnt over the years that I take my best photographs when I am totally in the moment, and really concentrating. If you're also there and you are talking to them, or interviewing them, it takes the attention away from me. And then I can more easily capture a moment, as people relax a bit. I am very aware of their response to the camera and I photograph with this in mind.

MdT: Which photographs do you think reflect that people were comfortable with your presence?

Look at the street photograph of Angel and her friends and neighbours, for example (Plate Twenty-one). People spend a lot of time hanging out in the street when they live in very crowded conditions, and except for this photograph I didn't really manage to capture that enough. I just sat there until they forgot about me and went on with their lives. I was actually sitting around talking to someone who is not within the photograph's frame. I think I was explaining the project to other people who weren't in the photograph. I do want to get away from conventional

responses to the camera. It's not that I want them to forget - and I don't think they actually do forget about the camera.

As I said earlier, people in Wentworth, Merebank and Lamontville were most often familiar with family occasion photography, pictures in which you're smiling at the camera, or newspaper photography. Even though they're going to use the pictures that they get from me for their family albums or put them on their walls, I don't want them to 'act up for the camera' or feel stiff and awkward. That's why I always make sure that someone is talking, so that there isn't an uncomfortable silence while they're sitting there in front of the camera. And in those situations people were very happy to tell someone about, for example, their asthma. At the same time, I don't want anything to intrude on me capturing something about them, their personality, their character. When photographs are taken inside a home, it is very hard, in somebody's very crowded small lounge, for them not to be aware of everything that I am doing. Sometimes I have to ask if I can move some furniture, so I can get my tripod in and frame the photograph in a way that makes sense. Sometimes I have to ask that they open the curtains to let in more light, because I never use a flash. For me it is better to recognize that they will be aware of my presence and to work with the way they are relating to me.

MdT: People sometimes think that your photographs are posed, at least, that you have posed the subjects in a particular way. Perhaps one reason is that in so many of the portraits the atmosphere is quite serious and still. But from my observation, the moment when the photograph was taken was always part of a discussion, a negotiation, and also often something of a social occasion.

JG: A lot of people do think that my photos are posed. Except for my photograph of Dulcie, no one is smiling at me but most people saw this as a very solemn, serious occasion, and therefore they didn't smile (Plate Fifteen). Perhaps this was so because the conversation was often about the serious issues that they faced in their lives, such as pollution. Look at my portrait of Mr Gopal and Mrs Premi Govender (Plate Seven). I actually went there twice, and I spent a long time talking to them. It was not just about the moment of taking the picture. They were very ill and distressed that morning, they were having bad asthma attacks while I was there, and really wheezing. We were having quite an intense conversation and Mr Govender had actually sat forward at the moment when I took this photograph. By nature he was a very quiet man and liked his wife to speak, but he was making a point to me about how his bad asthma was affecting his job as a caretaker at Merebank Secondary School, and explaining that his younger son was also affected.

I think quite often when I was taking portraits we were sitting in the lounge, people had invited us in and were offering us tea. We would speak with them before I started taking pictures. I often had to explain in detail what I was doing and why. I always had someone from the neighbourhood with me, usually a teenager, to help me take notes and to carry my equipment. But most often I was

also with someone who was doing the explaining – you, or one of the community volunteers. For me it is very important that I must ask people for permission to take a photograph. I think the simple decision to ask people has led to me photographing in a certain way - mostly people are looking straight at me into the camera. This appears very old-fashioned and is very different from most photography in the documentary and contemporary fine art field where even if people notice that you are photographing them it is too late to do anything about it. Jeff Dyer, as part of a discussion about street photography, asks whether it was 'possible that "the photographer could get a *quality of being* through the fact that a person *knew* he was being photographed',<sup>18</sup> I find this question interesting, because I do think that the person's awareness of being photographed enables me to represent a *quality of being*, not only out in the street but also inside people's houses.

MdT: Let's look at some specific photographs. I'm interested in how you think the photographs work, as portraits of people, and as environmental portraits, and how the two aspects of your portraiture – conveying a social problem and that quality of being of a particular person - work together. We've already talked about the portraits that you took at the Wema (S.J. Smith) hostel, and how important it was to photograph people in the tiny space that they could claim, even if it was their boyfriend's bed. I think the photograph of Dulcie Marncce that you took at her home, and of Mrs Elder Madondo in the Issy Geshwin old age home are interesting to consider in this respect (Plates Fourteen and Fifteen).

JG: Both of these women were elderly. In fact, Auntie Dulcie was already 79 at the time and older than Mrs Madondo, but so very active. She was the oldest participant in our photographic workshop of 2003, but one of the most energetic. I had to photograph her a couple of times before I got a photograph that I was happy with. I photographed her in the street, at friends, playing music in the old age home where she goes most days to entertain and spend time with people whom nobody else visits. She is a warm, friendly, engaging person and her crowded lounge where I photographed her also had an energetic warm atmosphere. I don't usually like people smiling at the camera, but in this case I decided to go with the picture of her smiling as it embodied her personality. For me, the portrait also brings up another aspect. A lot of people who are activists in the three communities that I photographed are religious people, and their commitment to the community comes from their religious beliefs. This was something that I had never experienced before.

I went to the Issy Geshwin Home with Oliver Meth. It struck me that there were no personal pictures but the whole room where I took the photograph of Mrs Elder Madondo was full of beds. The photograph makes me think of my aunt who is also in frail care, but who has her own room with all her pictures and her own furniture. The Issy Geshwin Home was a good place, it was clean and people

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<sup>18</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*, p17.

were cared for. But I think there is an issue of not having things of your own, that in itself is quite debilitating.

MdT: I also like to look at the photographs that you took of Mrs Mari in Merebank, and of Gertrude Ngubane who replaced her husband as the Inkatha town counselor in Lamontville, together, because they do seem to convey the personalities and histories of these two women in quite complex ways (Plates Twelve and Thirteen). You'll remember that at our last exhibition in Cape Town, someone who had grown up in Wentworth but later fled and settled in Cape Town because he was sought by the security police became very wrought up and even cried when he told us that Mrs Mari had provided a safe house for young activists from South Durban in the 1980s. He said that having those two portraits next to each other at the exhibition, together with that of Lamontville ANC activist Nontsikilelo Khali made sense, because of the intertwined political histories. He recalled the dangers of visiting Lamontville when he was seventeen and joined the ANC underground, meeting some ANC activists there, and that Inkatha members from Lamontville posed as ANC recruiters and then betrayed young activists to the security police.

JG: When I was taking Mrs Ngubane and Mrs Mari's photographs I didn't really talk much to the women myself but they were talking to you, and I photographed them while they were talking to you. It's quite interesting that you are reflected in Mrs Mari's TV. I knew that she had been an activist, and wanted to portray this. She was talking to you about the photographs in her album, and I thought that if I asked her to hold it up for everyone to see the picture of her demonstrating, this would say something about her life. This was very unusual, as I almost never ask people to do anything specific or to pose in a particular way. I was struggling to find a way to convey that she'd had an active life politically. Actually this was the second time I photographed her, because I didn't think the first time I was successful in conveying what an amazing woman she was.

I do like looking at these pictures together. Before I went to photograph Mrs Ngubane I had been told that she was a counsellor for Inkatha under the old system, and had replaced her husband who was the previous counsellor. He is pictured up on the right above the door, and I love the picture of her with the first black South African bowling team, started by her husband. And her friends all came to sit near her, all on one side of her when I was photographing, but I was very interested in how she claimed a big double-seated chair for herself.

MdT: So perhaps this is an example of how complex the issue of representation can be – Mrs Ngubane chose how to pose and positioned the people in the photograph, but you liked how this showed up something of her sense of prestige. I can't remember this about Mrs Mari, but the former counsellor was definitely concerned that she wanted herself and her husband to be remembered in a particular way. She wanted her husband celebrated as the founder of the

first black bowling club in South Africa. She was very aware of which portraits and pictures were included in the frame and told us what they signified.

JG: And it's important to me, that people are able to choose how they want to be seen and want to be portrayed. It signifies their personality, how they look at themselves. People will sit or stand. Young people will also pose in a certain way and think they look good. How people react to the camera is part of taking a portrait. But I do want to go beyond that camera smile! I don't want to only catch the reaction to the camera. I want to represent more of the person than simply a conventional reaction to the camera.

MdT: You call these photographs environmental portraits. But an important aspect of the exhibition was that these quite intimate photographs of people in or near their homes were surrounded by very large panoramic landscape photographs, which was something new that you attempted with this project.

JG: When I was working on my Troyeville project in the 1980s and showed my photographs to David Goldblatt, he suggested that I put them in a context, and also take photographs outside. So I started experimenting with urban landscapes I also took photographs which were interiors but without people, which I'd never done before. And in South Durban I needed to find a way of showing how interspersed the residential spaces were with the industrial spaces. It was difficult to do this in a single image. That's why I started to do the panoramas.

In some of my panoramas there are people going about their daily lives, and in some, people are standing and looking at me. I was combining portrait and landscape in a way that I had not previously attempted. You can see Lavelle Hulley in the photograph taken from Ballerina Road above the Engen refinery (Plate One). She had participated in a few of our photography workshops and was working with me that day, and taking me around where she lives. She was not intentionally posing for the photograph. But I specifically did a portrait of Pradyumna and Pritha Das standing on the newly built second floor of their house (Plate Three). I did a couple of panoramas from that vantage-point, but found that the one with the couple in it worked the best for me. I'm more interested in people and their connection to the landscape than in a landscape on its own.

MdT: I also want to ask you about the editing process and how you choose between your photographs when you look at a contact sheet. As with most photographers, you usually took a number of photographs of the same person in any one situation. Working with the Hasselblad camera was expensive, so I suppose you didn't take as many as some others would.<sup>19</sup> But you still usually had at least several photographs to choose from, or a number of photographs that you took of people living in the same vicinity. What was involved in the process of choosing between them?

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<sup>19</sup> This is a medium format camera that takes square format photographs.

JG: When editing my photographs I always try to decide which photograph comes closest to conveying what I felt at the time. I like this quote from David Hurn, where he says: "I never claim my photographs reveal some definitive truth. I claim that this is what I saw and felt about the subject at the time the pictures were made. That's all that any photographer can claim."<sup>20</sup> Sometimes this gets difficult because I remember the moment I took – when I made the photograph, and I don't think the photograph is conveying what I felt the time.

MdT; I wanted to ask you about that word 'felt'. For me the word is often understood to refer to one's own internal emotional space. But I think you're referring to how you were responding to what was happening that moment? And it's also interesting to think about the conversations we've had about the aesthetics of a photograph, and how aesthetics, as the root of the word indicates, is also about perception. I also don't think it's simply about what you felt at the time. What do you mean by 'the time'? Perhaps what you are saying is that you were making a series of decisions about the situation and how you were trying to capture it, represent it.

JG: 'The time' for me is deciding where I am going to position myself, and the instant of seeing what I am looking for. And here I want to mention something about the language that people use about the moment that one takes the picture. People use the word 'shoot'. I find this deeply disturbing.. I prefer to say that I make, or take or that I conceive a photograph, in order to emphasise the fact that it is a process, although, with me, a largely unconscious process. But when I look at the photograph that has resulted I go back to that moment, that memory of taking the picture. And sometimes it will appear evident to me that I missed 'it' somehow. Because I cut something off, or I wasn't in the right place, or my reading of the light was wrong, for whatever reason I didn't actually get what I noticed or what I experienced. So I saw it, but I didn't manage to capture it.

MdT: I want to come back to the question that we began to discuss earlier when you remembered how fine art and photojournalist photographers used to respond to your photographs. What about the big debates with regards to social documentary photography, which were partly precipitated by the fact that photographers like Salgado published big and beautiful books and exhibited in art galleries? I'm thinking of the dismissal of his photographs because he was seen as presenting poverty as beautiful, and therefore as reinforcing passivity in the viewer. Does this debate about aesthetics and political intent apply to your photography? And when you choose between your photographs, how does the question of a photograph that is visually pleasing or visually compelling come into play?

JG: I think that one thing that divides Salgado's work from hard news photography is that it's created so much debate. And for me it shows how effective his work has been. So much has been written about Salgado. Some of

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<sup>20</sup> Bill Jay and David Hurn, *On Being a Photographer*, p42.



his pictures are sentimental but I think on the whole they're very, very powerful. David Levi-Strauss offers a powerful critique of the argument that Salgado is too concerned with producing a beautiful image and that it is ethically wrong to present tragedy in an aesthetic form. He challenges the idea that 'the more transformed or "aestheticised" an image is, the less "authentic" or politically valuable it becomes'. The question he poses is: 'Why can't beauty be a call to action?'<sup>21</sup>

MdT: I also like Levi-Strauss's point that the very way something is made, is political, that poetics and the political are 'not mutually exclusive nor even separate'. And that a work of art will only be compelling if it contains tension, so that it invites the viewer into a more complex response. He dismisses what he calls 'the anti-aesthetic tendency', saying that it really amounts to an effort 'to protect oneself from pain' and that Salgado finds ways to focus attention on the wounds and fissures of society.<sup>22</sup> Your photographs are not of people in such extremities of poverty and suffering. But I wonder if this argument also applies to your work, with regards to how you harness beauty and invite viewers to think about what they see?

JG: When I take a photograph, and later choose between my photographs, I obviously pay attention to where the lines are going, what kind of shapes there are in the picture, what effects the light causes, the mood of the photograph. Good aesthetics communicate more clearly and efficiently. What's very important to me and an important part of my aesthetic is that I want as much detail as possible. This is an important part of my aesthetic. I don't want white areas without detail, I find them particularly disturbing.

MdT: I do think that this aspect of your aesthetic and how you use the visual language of photography works to a particular purpose in terms of your message. As a substantial part of the exhibition, your choice to make *environmental* portraits that show people inside their homes make people and their homes present with a density of detail. I remember that I once discussed our project with a medical doctor from Merebank who belongs to the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance. He was part of a march to the city hall, and residents were confronting the eThekweni municipality about plans for a road that would benefit industry but cut through their neighbourhood. And he expressed his frustration to me that the social histories of the neighbourhoods – that people live there and have made their lives there for many years - remain unacknowledged by urban planners. I think that the rich detail of the portraits made their homes present in the space of the gallery and urged respect for these spaces.

But our use of text in combination with the photographs also made the exhibition quite distinct from art and from many social documentary photographic exhibitions. We spoke a lot about how we could achieve a balance between the

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<sup>21</sup> David Levi-Strauss, *Between the Eyes*, p9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp 7-8.

exhibition as a primarily visual experience and written text or 'labels' as I discovered they are called by art exhibition curators. How did you use text as part of previous photographic projects and what did our use of text bring to this exhibition?

JG: When I did the Mai Mai project, I interviewed someone who was like a headman, an elderly man who was quite important to the Mai Mai community. But I didn't use people's names because they were very reluctant to give their names in apartheid times. These were migrant labourers who were often in the city illegally, and also trading illegally. My Troyeville exhibition also didn't include names. There were a lot of people of different races living in Troyeville, and they were sometimes very scared about me photographing them. I had to agree not to put their names or addresses. The quotes that I then combined with the photographs were mainly from research that I did from newspaper articles. I think that it's made a very big difference to me, the fact that you were interviewing people about the photographs. And because the interviews happened during the process this also helped me to know how people were responding to my photographs and that was something new. I've always had to do that part of it myself. But why was it important to you to interview people?

I wanted to find out how people who related in some personal way to the people or the places who were photographed could be drawn into a conversation about the photographs. And how individuals would speak about their own portraits when given the opportunity. I was interested in how memory, and emotions, and also ideas about social issues could be part of the discussion. I wanted to bring local points of view into the exhibition space.

JG: So what do the quotes from interviews contribute to the exhibition, according to your thinking?

MdT: Many of the interview extracts that draw attention to issues of representation, and they also shift or complicate the point of view. When people walk around an exhibition and look at numbers of portraits, they can easily respond to them for the way in which they resemble each other and cohere. I think that when very personal perspectives are brought into the space of the exhibition this, dynamic can perhaps be interrupted. Social documentary photographs are usually viewed by people who are removed from the people and places that are represented. I was able to use extracts from interviews in which people articulated a strong emotional response and sometimes even explained why a photograph was important to them. Such as when Zwa Gwala said that he wanted a copy of the portrait because it showed his his friends and his partner, and also because it showed a 'long story', the shared experience of hardship (Plate Twenty-Three). So a frequent subject of social documentary, the difficult lives of others, was claimed and owned as personal memory.

JG: How did the use of material from interviews for the exhibition differ from your use of quotes in an academic context?

I find it interesting to think about our use of photographs and text to the way in relation to the popular research methodologies 'photo elicitation' and 'photovoice'<sup>23</sup> which also and sometimes involve the exhibition of photographs together with material from interviews. As far as I can see, there is very little interest in visual aesthetics, and photographs are primarily used as texts that can prompt a range of verbal responses. *Breathing Spaces* was primarily visual, with text that supported this visual communication. And as I learned from you, one has to use words differently in a photographic exhibition, because people won't read a lot of text. When using interviews as part of academic writing, I have always tried to stay as true to a verbatim interview transcript as possible, even if the words are halting and repetitive. But I found that it is impossible to do this in the context of an exhibition. The extracts had to be fairly short, and I had to sacrifice some of the editing conventions of oral history. For example, I mostly did not show where some words had been left out. The challenge was to find the right balance between careful transcription, and editing that made a comment easy enough to read. My decisions as to which words I selected and how I edited the text therefore also had ethical implications, because in the exhibition, interview extracts were presented as the words of specific individuals with no explanation as to the editing process.

JG: You sometimes included your own interview questions as part of an extract of dialogue. Why did you choose this different format?

Mdt: Some of the interviews became uncomfortable for me and for the interviewees. I wanted to make visible the discomfort that people were sometimes experienced when imagining how they would look to an audience. As when Jennifer Davids anticipated that people would view her partner as poor, or when Jacky Davids worried that she is 'so black there' in the photograph (Plate Six). The dialogue format allowed me to expose the uneasy exchange between myself and the interviewee.

JG: But I think that most people were comfortable with the photographs. And for me the perspective that someone like Mrs Perumal contributed is very valuable. She identified with the project and saw the photographs as part of her community

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<sup>23</sup> Photo elicitation is well established as a qualitative research method in a range of disciplines. See, for example, Christopher John Pole, *Seeing is Believing? Approaches to Visual Research* (Emerald Group Publishing, 2004) and D Harper, 'Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation' (*Visual Studies*, Volume 17, 1). 'Photovoice' as a participatory action research method and as a strategy for qualitative research has become popular in such fields as health, psychology, education and management. Participants document aspects of their own lives and often also participate in interviews about the photographs or produce text alongside the photographs. See also the advocacy work of the non profit organisation PhotoVoice ([www.PhotoVoice.org](http://www.PhotoVoice.org)) For South African examples, see de Lange et al, *Putting People in the Picture*. Many photovoice projects have involved visual displays that combine quotes from interviews and photographs by participants.

activism. I find her comment on Mrs Reebee's portrait very powerful (Plate Four). I think this quote adds a lot because Mrs Perumal looking at the photograph in a different way from your usual audience.

MdT: Yes, she combined an ability to look very sensitively at the photograph with her knowledge of illness that comes from her work as a health activist. So that she teaches one to notice the physical signs of illness and pain. I think that her words are powerful because of her compassion with illness, as someone who tries to oppose the effects of pollution. She's also identifying with Mrs Reebee as a neighbour, and explaining how close to home the pain that she reads in the picture is, that her husband suffers in the same way.

I also want to ask you about the various audiences, or publics that have viewed your photographs. I think that local viewers – in this case the residents of Durban and specifically of the neighbourhoods where the pictures were taken - have remained important to you. But now the exhibition has also traveled beyond Durban.

JG: One difficulty about being a photographer in South Africa is that there isn't much public debate about photographic exhibitions and photographer's work. It's often very difficult to even get a review in the regional and national papers. But it's also interesting to think more closely about the dynamic between the person who takes a photograph and the people who look at it. Ansel Adams once said that '(t)here are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer'. Adams photographed landscapes, but even in my panoramic landscape photographs there usually is a person looking at me, the photographer, and therefore also at the viewer. You could say that there are at least three people involved in every one of my photographs. For me, if at all possible, a photograph also has to work on three levels - in relation to these three people.

MdT: What do you mean by that? Do you mean that a photograph will be viewed differently by different people and has to work for all of them?

JG: It's important to remember that the viewers of these photographs are very different. Very different people have looked at these photographs, in terms of where they live and how their lives relate to the photographs. We wanted the photographs to communicate with people who had never been to these neighbourhoods, and yet to be meaningful to the residents themselves. In fact, if you just think of the people who are in the photographs, the photographs have to work on lots of different registers for them.

MdT: They knew it would be part of an exhibition, and many of the people who are in the portraits and their families came to the exhibition at the Durban Art Gallery. But to people like Zwa Gwala from Wema, these were also personal

photographs that they wanted to keep and that contained, as he said when I interviewed him, 'long stories'.

JG: I like it that many people also put the photographs up in a frame or in an album. As we've said before, sometimes the people just like them because they're sharp and clear, and they haven't had access before to photographs by a professional. I suppose I'm more in the tradition of family photography. That's how most people use or think of my photographs. But a sharper, more satisfying version of that. I suppose because most of the more recent photographs that they've got are not taken by a professional. And they're fuzzy or faded. I also found it interesting that many people who went to the exhibition commented how unusual it was to see their neighbourhoods represented in a gallery, and experienced it as a validation.

Mdt: Such as the teenagers who commented that "we think the photos are very interesting. Some of us feel that part of it represents our life. And our homes", and Patience Thusi of Lamontville who wrote that "The picture of Lamontville Central can be easily recognized even by my son who is three years of age. It reminds me of home. I live next to the Centre, I use the same shop and the same road when I'm going to catch a taxi to work". Or the high school student from Merebank who wrote that of a panoramic photograph showing the informal settlement Barcelona 2 in Lamontville: "That's what photography is about – capturing reality. The airplane in the background –what a contrast. When is SA going to 'take off'? I'm sure these photos won't be in any tourism mag. But they need to be taken places!!".