Environmental Portraiture, Neighbourhood photo documentary and Family Photographs in the Making of the Breathing Spaces Exhibition.

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Work in progress. Do not quote

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to reflect on central aspects of the project that resulted in the exhibition ‘Breathing Spaces: Environmental Portraits of Durban’s Industrial South’, shown in the Durban Art Gallery in July 2007 and in Cape Town’s Iziko Gallery of Good Hope at The Castle in 2009. The exhibition was the culmination of the Durban South Photography Project, focused on three adjacent neighbourhoods, Wentworth, Merebank and Lamontville. We are currently preparing a book version.

The DSPP was conceptualised as a project that would create visual portraits of Durban’s industrial-residential neighbourhoods. This part of Durban has mostly been excluded from dominant popular and official images of the city. The South Durban industrial basin bears a strong imprint of apartheid-era planning. In Wentworth the stacks of the Engen oil refinery tower over surrounding council flats and houses. The first of the two refineries that exist today, it was built in the early 1950s. ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian council homes were built close by from the late 1950s and high density flats in the 1970s. The Mondi paper factory is some 50 years old. Numerous small petro-chemical companies also add to high levels of pollution. Lamontville is situated slightly inland and is Durban’s oldest African township, built in 1934.

This starkly persistent geography of apartheid drew us to choose this area for a photographic project, but we also wanted to work in this part of Durban because it has a strong history of political, civic and especially from the 1990s, environmental activism. The southern industrial basin became a flashpoint in the fight for environmental justice after 1994. Urban planning has remained a matter of vigorous and often bitter contestation. Durban’s eThekwini Municipality and other tiers of government are responsive to industry’s desire for prime land like that of the airport, vacated in 2010. Recently, ambitious plans for a dug-out harbour in the industrial basin have exacerbated these tensions.
Breathing Spaces was the culmination of a spiral of public exhibitions, starting in the areas where we worked and moving outwards over time. We introduced ourselves to neighbourhoods by offering intensive photographic workshops (held over about three weeks) during the mid-year school holidays. Exhibitions that showed the work of participants were mounted in the municipal libraries of the respective neighbourhoods. The workshops created opportunities for Jenny to visit participants at home. We gave people who agreed to be photographed copies of their portraits (and often of other photographs, taken ‘for the family’).

From the beginning we also asked activists and community workers to introduce us to matters of local concern, and to people whom Jenny should photograph. By 2003 neighbourhood activists and community volunteers were also invited to participate in the workshops. A core group of young people and adults continued to work with us over three of four years, with intermittent sessions of planning and reviewing their photographs, and also sessions in which they looked at and commented on Jenny’s photographs.

This paper does not focus on the exhibitions but rather on the process of photographic production, interviews and the working relationships that these entailed. However, a brief explanation particularly of the Durban Art Gallery exhibition will help the reader to understand some of the overall aims and ambitions of the project. The DAG is in the Durban City Hall in the Central Business District and very close to bus and taxi transport networks. It is above a natural science museum and the municipal library. It is also frequently visited by many schools from greater Durban and also generally by residents of the city’s mostly black working-class neighbourhoods. A smaller number of tourists and more well-heeled South Africans also come to exhibitions.

Breathing Spaces could be called an installation, as it featured photographs mounted on specially designed metal stands, a large photographic map pasted onto the floor, oil drums, large decorative banners of beads (made of beads and multiple objects picked up at a rubbish dump outside Lamontville and also photographs). The oil drums acted as tables for comment books, and a long table also had large sheets of paper on which visitors wrote their responses to questions about how they viewed the exhibition and its photographs. The exhibition even
included framed family portraits borrowed from members of our long-term working group.

Various genres of photography were incorporated. Jenny’s portrait and landscape photographs formed the backbone of the exhibition. These were presented together with reproductions of personal photography sourced from residents, and a section of the exhibition also featured many photographs by participants from the workshops. Large panoramic landscape photographs (1.2 to 8 metres long) were displayed on the gallery walls so that viewers saw the portraits against these backdrops.

Durban Art Gallery, July 2007. The photographic aerial map is visible at the bottom right photograph.
Behind these portraits is a composite photograph of the Barcelona II informal settlement in Lamontville, and in front (left to right) is a portrait by Jenny Gordon of Roy Lakram of Merebank, a reproduction of a photograph of his father, and other family photographs of men from all three neighbourhoods.

Descriptive captions identified people by name. A number of photographs were also accompanied by quotes taken from interviews that in which the subject of a photograph, a friend or perhaps a neighbourhood activist responded to questions that sought to elicit a personal response to the image.

The DSPP as conceptualised at the beginning therefore involved several quite distinct ‘photographies’. As the project unfolded it became increasingly clear that the relationship between these photographs, referred to as quite distinct in early descriptions and funding documents, were complex and dynamic. Early on we described Jenny’s photography as that of an ‘outsider’, compared to ‘insider’ photographs taken at the workshops. When we first started to work in an area, people certainly sometimes asked us which ‘nation’ (or ‘country’) we were from (as white South Africans presumably did not often spend time in the ways we did). As we came to know people better shared memories, jokes, affinities of gender, generation, language wove through conversations. Where were the borders of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’? What dynamics of strangeness and difference, but also sometimes, familiarity, sympathy or solidarity structured photographic occasions? How did this change, as we ran consecutive photographic workshops and built friendships and relationships with the small group who participated in a number of sessions over three or four years? What portraiture resulted from these processes, and how were
these interpretations of ‘everyday life’? In fact, the nature of portrait, of social documentary and of personal and family photography has been a topic of conversation between us for the duration of the project. How certain photographs might constitute ‘history’ have also been a theme of discussion.

What follows is a somewhat experimental text format and also work-in-progress. Some of the writing ‘works’ as a composite text that may be attributed to both of us. But because we contributed to the project in very distinct ways and especially because Jenny was the photographer and Marijke did interviews, it has often proved impossible to reflect on and to write about the project except from specific subject positions. In order to make these conversations between us a visible part of the text we shift between more general discussion and text composed in the first person in which we directly address each other.
1. Camera-work and thinking about photographs as cultural objects

A man is seated in this crowded space, a cloth draped over his body so that only his head is clearly visible. The viewer’s eye moves between three faces and especially, perhaps, hands busy with camera and tripod.

The depths and surfaces of this small cramped space are difficult to sort out at first glance, although after a moment the viewer will realize that reflections in a mirror form part of the image. In fact, the photograph has three levels – in front of the mirror, the mirror itself, and the space above it. There is also a hint of the outside on the right. The sticker and the keys on the mirror’s surface help the viewer to identify the reflections. But only once the eye moves to the top of the photograph and to the row of planks does it become possible to identify the space as the interior of some sort of wooden shack.
Objects clutter the surfaces. In the top left hand corner is a woman’s face, her features arranged into an expression familiar from countless advertisements. A bottle of hair product is also partly visible in this image. In the foreground are brushes and other tools.

We have chosen to start our discussion with this photograph because of how it shows elements of our working process in a project that was about photographing people in the places where they lived and worked. As such, it also offers opportunities to think more closely about the truism that any photograph represents only a fragment of reality – specifically from the perspective of those involved in producing images for a project such as ours.

Jenny: The mirror is one frame, which includes only certain things, much like the photographic frame itself. In the mirror are my tripod, camera lens and hands. In the past, I would go to great lengths to make sure that I would not appear in a photograph, when working in a space with mirrors or reflective surfaces.

Marijke: But quite early on in the process of doing this project, in fact when photographing Mr and Mrs Govender in Merebank, you left part of your camera on their coffee table and thus visible in the photograph. You were really frustrated when you noticed this and even speculated about editing it out, although of course, this was something you never did. And we spoke about this aspect of portraiture and social documentary – I argued that it was not necessary to edit out, to frame a photograph so as to exclude all signs of producers or researchers, and that in fact, much social documentary was framed as if wanting to naturalize the photograph, or so as to de-emphasise the presence of the photographer. And throughout the project but especially perhaps early on, you would tell me to move out of sight, while speaking with the person who was being photographed.

Jenny: I realized that in the close spaces in which I was often photographing, it was part of the dynamics of the photographic process that everyone knew that I was photographing them. And that it did not necessarily matter if I was in the line of sight of the camera or if one could see a bit of equipment. Here I could have framed the hairdressers and their client more closely in order to eliminate the reflections in the mirror. But I chose not to. I wanted to have us in the frame. In fact, I was still not relaxed about including myself in a photograph and I took it more as a record. I did not anticipate that we would end up using it in the exhibition or the book. You were talking
to the guys in Zulu and I consciously included you. But it is also important to think about what the photograph as it has been framed does not show. It does not include much of an idea of where these hair cutting implements that are both inside and outside the mirror are. It does not really show what kind of space all these people are in.

This was the winter of 2006, Jenny’s fourth winter of working in the city. The place was the S.J. Smith hostel popularly known as Wema and situated just outside Lamontville. In the previous year we had completed our third large photographic workshop, held in this neighbourhood, and our work also now focused more intensely on this part of the industrial basin.

For us this photograph showing us at work at the Wema migrant hostel also vividly brings to mind the challenges of visually and textually representing the ‘reality’ that one experiences, as a living body in three-dimensional space. Elizabeth Edward’s theorising of the the “multi-sensory and inter-sensory nature of photographs” comes to mind. She considers how

we might extend the understanding of photographs beyond the visual itself, and thus extend our theory of photography beyond the dominant semiotic, linguistic and instrumental models to a more strongly phenomenological approach, in which materiality and the sensual play a central role in how photographs are understood.

Her concern, she explains, is “the sensory engagement with the physical photograph as a material object...” This involves “questions regarding how the sensory saturates the link between people and people, and people and things in the social uses of photographs”. Edwards introduces the phenomenological concept of cultural systems or ‘lifeworlds’:

that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical peculiarities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies.

If we are to understand how photographs are apprehended through the various senses and in this domain of everyday, it is crucial to “think beyond the visual”. Moreover, “(m)ateriality is of key

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2 Ibid.
importance here because materiality precisely emphasizes the relational qualities of photographs in a social context.”

Looking at these photographs now, we might remember the built structures of Wema, how the wooden structures that housed small businesses included an over-hang where homeless, mostly alcoholic people slept, the three story hostel buildings nearby. Our visit to the Wema hostels was part of a longer dynamic of learning about how the remnants of apartheid and industrial policies were experienced in the present. We had asked Jabu Ngcobo, who had long been involved in youth development and social assistance projects in Lamontville, to suggest places that we should visit in order to better understand and convey the social issues that needed to be addressed. She had facilitated our visit to the hostel. Still managed by the municipality, it was something like a poor man’s gated community, a remnant from the era of migrant labour. A minority of women now also lived in problematic circumstances. Jabu Ncgobo was involved in a project with a group of women who were trying to contest their lack of privacy and relative lack of power at the hostel. When we look at the photographs from Wema now, we have these various spaces and mind. This involves thinking of the sounds, the smells, air on skin early in the morning. Of course, this would be very different from the experience of someone looking at the photographs, who had never been there. But many visitors to our DAG exhibition were in fact familiar with these, or similar spaces.

Marijke: There are also stages in how we responded to an image that we’ve made. In previous years, you would have been working in the darkroom and you still did, in the first years of this project. By 2006 you would have worked with small contact prints, and later the negatives were digitally scanned. But the photograph was an everyday object, handled by us as material objects that made up the project. We would lay these out and consider the relationships between them as visual images, and whether they could convey our understanding of the places that we had been visiting. They became pieces of the puzzle that made up the exhibition and that included the large panoramic images against which these photographs were read.

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2. Environmental Portraits and the dynamics of personal remembrance

Marijke: Let’s look at a portrait taken at the Wema hostel on our first visit. We met with some of the women who lived there, we were learning about their living circumstances. You had taken several portraits of women framed by themselves as we spoke to people in the very crowded and congested rooms. You were photographing some of the other residents of a room with ten beds when Makhosi Nxumalo asked you to also take a photograph of her. She was already sitting in a corner of the room and called for her friends to join her. For me this image is reminiscent of the portraits that David Goldblatt took of women living in Soweto and that we that we discuss in our review of his recent book. You commented of his portrait of Miriam Diale that

(s)he is sitting on her bed, looking straight towards the viewer. The wall behind Miriam Diale has a bare and uneven surface, but her gaze and posture conveys self-possession and a contained sensuality.⁵

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Jenny: Makhosi Nxumalo also has an immense presence and she dominates the portrait. What was amazing for me was her calm confidence, as we had just been hearing how hard life in Wema was for women, although we did later learn that she lived in town. I made sure to include the picture from a magazine at the top right and even though her body’s positioning echoes that of the model, her posture and expression is different. She projects a confident sensuality. Goldblatt accompanied the portrait with another photograph which showed part of her room and an arrangement of personal possessions and text that conveyed more layers of Miriam Diale’s individuality. When I was taking these pictures at Wema, what I saw and heard made me think about how important it is to have your own small space, never mind a house. An environmental portrait aims to represent the personal spaces of individuals, and the residents of the hostel 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 women whom I also photographed. She was very young and had a steady boyfriend. She commented that you’ve got to spread your legs to get a bed in the hostel.

Marijke: When I returned to the Wema Hostel about a year later with a copy of the portrait I interviewed Xolani Ngcobo whom we had also photographed spoke to me as I was also talking with Zwa Gwala, who turned out to be Makhosi Nxumalo’s partner and who had not been in the room when we took the portraits. Xolani Ngcobo commented on the expressions of the men in the portrait with Nxumalo:

   But they’re so very serious because of suffering, hey. I know all the life of these guys. It’s because I know that this guy is not working, and this brother – he’s here for a job.6

He had himself been unemployed at that time and if his comment spoke directly to the social documentary intent of the photograph, he spoke with fellow feeling and personal experience. Zwa Gwala’s response was intense, as he held and looked at the photograph and explained why he wanted and needed a copy. He was claiming the photograph as personal. Included in the exhibition, the comment could be read as narrowing the gap between the ‘lifeworlds’ of persona photographies and the social documentary image. The latter so often involves a distancing

6 Interview with Xolani Ngcobo, 23 June 2007.
between subject and viewer. We spoke in a mixture of English and isiZulu and his explanation is only slightly shortened:

I need this picture, I love it. Kahle kakhulu (it’s beautiful). She is my wife, my Makhosi. These are my friends. Siyazwana (we feel for each other). I need this snap. Because it can show me the long language, it gives umlando omningi (much history), long story. You see when you stay like this, with someone you love, it is hard.\(^7\)

Elizabeth Edwards considers not only the “material forms of the image-object” but also “performative strategies which link the body of the viewer with specific sensory formations, in relation to a thing”. This argument is relevant to the fact that the portraits that Jenny took at the Wema Hostel, as with other portraits, were not only ‘taken away’ but also ‘given back’. Edwards reminds us that photographs are “handled, caressed, stroked, kissed, torn...” in ways that blur the distinction between person, index and thing”. That photographs as part of “performative material culture” involve “their physical presence in the social world” as they people write on them, exchange them, display or put them in places of safe-keeping. “(M)ateriality and the image itself is inseparable”, and it is “the image itself” that moves people to “embodied responses”.

Of course, copies of images may be printed, reproduced, withheld or given, and this has repercussions for their presence as part of material cultures. Another portrait photograph – or more specifically the conversation that happened around and about this photograph – provides additional perspectives for the Breathing Spaces project as to the relationship between documentary photography and personal photography.

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\(^7\) Interview with Zwa Gwala, 23 June 2007.
3. Memories of struggle photography and Mrs Marie’s family album

Marijke: In 2005, two years after we visited Mrs Latchamee Marie for the second time and you took the portrait that more or less satisfied you, I returned to interview her. I was with environmental researcher and activist Michelle Solomons, who grew up on Merebank and who knew Mrs Marie for many years. In fact, they had gone to many of the same political demonstrations, including the demonstration that would be central to the interview, when residents demanded that the local paper manufacturer Mondi must stop driving their trucks through residential streets and endangering the lives of children. Mrs Marie’s family had moved from Clairwood because of the Group Areas Act, in 1959. I think that it was in the 1980s that she became involved in many protests organised by the Merebank Residents Association which also affiliated to the UDF. At the exhibition in Cape Town in 2009, a man started crying as he
looked at this portrait and told us how Mrs Marie provided a safe house for young underground ANC activists.

Jenny: Mrs Marie is seated in an arm chair in the lounge, perhaps looking slightly past the camera. She holds a family album open at the page which had a black and white photograph of her holding a placard at a demonstration against Mondi. I think that you had suggested that she could hold the album. This was when we went back to photograph as the picture taken outside her house did not seem to convey much of who she was. I usually limited any suggestions as to seating arrangements and so on to making sure that there was enough light but I was struggling to portray her.

Marijke: For the exhibition caption we chose a part from the interview when she spoke explicitly about the persistence of economic equality. She said looking at the photograph she thought about her “hurt” about “what we was striving for and what is going on now”. How “everything was turned away”, how especially the people in African townships were “still suffering today” and how apartheid is “not over at all”.

![Photograph of Mrs Marie holding a protest placard](image-url)
At the interview we spent quite some time looking at and discussing the photograph in her album. Her reflection about contemporary politics and the ideals of the struggle came right at the end when I again asked her what came into her mind when she looked at this picture now. I commented that the photograph was “quite different from the other pictures in this album.” On the day that you took the portrait, Mrs Marie had also showed me a black and white photograph of her older sister when she was a young woman, wearing a pretty flower pattern dress, and explained how she had been involved in trade unions and the SACP.

One interesting about meeting Mrs Marie was that she was one of the few people who was aware of political photo journalism. We later discovered that Afrapix photographer Rafiq (Rafs) Mayet had taken that photograph - he came to the public preview of photographs that we held when we were preparing for the exhibition of 2007 and identified it as his.

Marijke: In the interview her memories of photojournalists at work emerged in a complex way. I asked that we look at the page in her album that she holds open in the portrait that you took. She first described the protest and explained what it was about. There was a big protest by Mondi workers. As Mrs Marie said, “(a) at the same time we was protesting the road thing. We wanted access road, the Mondis to open up the access road. And then the children will be more safer to go to school across the road”. She mentioned how “the photographers had very little chance to take pictures from far away”. So the first time that she mentions photo journalists, they are these distant figures trying to cover the events. But looking at this photograph she also commented that the picture had somehow been sent to her:

I don’t know how this picture came here to me. Somebody came and delivered it. The picture. But so many people, I don’t know who, you know, brought this. This picture that was a – and then my son said no we don’t just lose that picture here and there, we rather put it here and then it’ll stay there for years! And one day if you’re gone then we know, your picture is there.

So she describes how a photograph taken to document local civic struggle became a family photograph and memento, pasted in next to more conventional family and personal photographs, through discussion between mother and son. I wanted to know what personal memories the photograph might spark: “If you look at that picture, does it bring memories with it?”

Still looking at the photograph in her album, she recalled another picture and another MRA protest event.
This is when the discussion became interesting for thinking of the relationship between journalistic photographs and memory, and personal photographs. Mrs Mari first recalled how people from her neighbourhood would query her where she was standing with the placard ‘Everybody who I knew they stopped there in the road and say what you’re doing here, I said I’m doing what I’m supposed to do (laughing).’ But then her next words were about another event, a memorial service for “friends from Merebank” who were one of eleven people who were killed in a raid in Maputo in 1981:

You know privately, not a very public service, we was gonna you know, talk about them, and we was gonna feel sorry for them and all that, that time too there was a lot of photographers taking pictures and all.\(^8\)

Mrs Marie was in fact not only talking about a different event but about a different photograph, one taken by Omar Badsha of the memorial service organised by the MRA.\(^9\) She recalled the event, the photograph of her and her friends and how over time, she became aware that the image had an impact as it traveled:

That memorial service - it was a memorial service. And then somebody came and told us that the special branch were hanging around outside you know. So we heard that while we was a meeting there. And then our meeting went o-o-n and we are screaming! And somewhere I got a big

\(^8\) Interview with Mrs Marie, 16 May 2005.  
\(^9\) This photograph was also published in South Africa: The Cordoned Heart (edited by Francis Wilson and Omar Badsha) in 1986.
poster, big poster like that, got it - and you can see – (raises her arm and balls her fist) you know? ...
... after a couple of years another friend of mine when overseas. Overseas CNA. They say they saw that picture, that same picture in the magazine there. And they, they say, that guy say, you know, we didn’t know we got such a powerful hmm, you know, political people around here. We didn’t know. When they saw that picture there, in the CNA and they – when they came back and they told me, this is what happened. I said how come? They said you were there, you! You can see you were screaming your guts out in that picture.

So I said Oh I’m glad, I’m glad that you saw it. That went so far away. That picture went. Ja. It went so far away. Then I met my friend and I told her, you know what, you know our picture has gone over seas, and she said how come. I said it’s in the magazine. It’s in the magazine. I said maybe if they wanna go through their magazine then they could see what’s happening in South Africa. You know?

Mrs Marie was in fact not able to read or write. A bit later in the conversation she reminded us that she could not read the poster that she held. “one minute, I didn’t know what was the writing. When somebody was coming standing and reading that thing I – hey! They were you know reading it and saying beware! Beware!” Perhaps that sense of wonder about how this photograph traveled and communicated was party related to this fact.

Several times, we had tried to photograph older political activists and union organisers, and also people active in current union or environmental politics. But for one reason or other, the portraits rarely ‘worked’ as visual images. The portrait of Mrs Marie was included in the exhibition because of her critical voice as a person long committed to civic struggle and to speaking out for human rights. It is also important to understand the how our working relationships with contemporary neighbourhood activists and people who were in one way or another committed to building a sense of community where they lived shaped the portraiture and social documentary photography that formed part of the DSPP.

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10 The CNA or Central News Agency had a large number of branches across South Africa and sold newspapers, magazines, popular books and stationary.
11 Interview with Mrs Marie
Jenny: The photograph of Mrs Marie was important to us because of what she said in the interview and because of what we knew about her as a person. But I felt that the photograph of Auntie Olga was a much stronger individual image. I met Mrs Olga Labuschagne where she lived in the Hyme Street flats. Lorna McDonald, one of our long-term workshop participants, accompanied me. Her sister Ursula lived there and her own house was a short distance away. I had first met Auntie Olga as I was photographing in the courtyard of the flats. She wanted a portrait with her nephew. I think she even got dressed up for this picture. Actually I don’t think she had many family photographs so I think that a portrait together her nephew was very meaningful to her.

She comes across as quite a forceful personality compared to the two boys sitting behind her. That’s why the portrait works for me. The three are quite quite at home with each other. The two young men are sitting in a fairly relaxed way and they seem to be comfortable with sitting close together with Auntie Olga.
Marijke: The extract from the interview that we chose for the exhibition and works well together with the visual image. When I brought her a copy of the photograph and asked her what she thought about when she looked at it she spoke of how her nephew talked nonsense with her in the kitchen and made her happy. “At least he’s my little company”. She explained that she welcomed his friends because “I was also in St Philomena’s school you see, in the orphanage school, there in Malvern.” Her hands are that of a capable woman. Her right hand is in repose, it has energy. His hands with his disability look quite small and vulnerable.

Jenny: This portrait happened quite quickly and serendipitously compared to the one with Mrs Marie. But this fluid process followed from dynamics that are important to unravel. That Lorna McDonald had taken me there and that she was also involved in the photography project and in taking photographs was crucial to its making even if she was not present at that moment. As an outsider and as I got to know people better I could blend in to some extent and gain more trust, and thus also access deeper meanings. For me this is important as part of thinking about the idea of the vernacular. The people with whom I worked on the long term and to whom I taught photography also shaped my work. I was accepted by residents in a different way than with previous projects. For the first time in my life was regularly called Auntie Jenny.
Jenny: Lorna is standing there very seriously and solemnly. She is touching her brother’s name. This was a very collaborative portrait. Lorna wanted to be photographed next to the Wall of Remembrance with the name of her brother who had stabbed to death at a young age. This photograph also works for us because of the significance it had for her. Because we know the details about the wall and the area and the significance it had in her life. On the wall it says “lost lifes of Da Himes” which refers the council flats. I do see this photograph as being very personal to Lorna even though it is not taken in her lounge, as with Auntie Olga and Mrs Marie. In retrospect I was very glad that I had taken this photograph for her as the wall was painted over much to her and other activists’ disgust. In a way my photograph provides at best a glimpse of very personal stories and that’s why the interviews and captions are so important to people who don’t come from this area.

If you come from Austerville and this part of the neighbourhood you would know that this wall symbolized all the young people who had died either because of violence or because of AIDS.
From simply looking at the photograph, you would not know that at the beginning the wall was mainly in remembrance of people who died because of the gang fights that took place in the area after Wentworth was built as an apartheid township. By the 1990s, this was taken over by deaths from HIV Aids. So it is quite symbolic of what was happening in the area.

Marijke: Lorna’s own family photographs that she chose for the exhibition also included a strong theme of remembrance and sometimes, of loss. She told one such story at the exhibition opening when I walked through the exhibition together with participants, explaining the poignancy of the one sister teasingly touching the other’s breast – she was still a young woman a few years later when breast cancer killed her within a year of diagnosis.

It was very unexpected because she is from my father’s side of the family and not a single person in our family has died from cancer... we’re still very close to her daughters.... I must actually tell them that their mother’s picture is up, I haven’t spoken them since we put this up. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.

The caption that she wrote for the final exhibition at the DAG included this history.

Lorna’s caption: “Girly Baxendale and her sister Eunice Allan in Grey Street in the early 1970s. They would always tease each other's breast sizes. Girly had huge breasts and Eunice had average size breasts. They both later developed breast cancer and died within two years of each other. Although both families
suffered a huge loss, we always smile when we speak of them. They were both as warm and friendly as the photo suggests”.

6. Silences, mortal illness and memory

Jenny: This photograph always moves me. Sylvia King is standing holding photographs of her parents. The memento mori of those who have already passed away are held in her arms. Her granddaughter - she would have to bring her up - sits next to her. She is in her lounge and on a bed in the background her dying daughter sleeps. We decided not to mention the nature of her illness in the captions. I also left out the portraits of young women who were near death, although they themselves had given me permission before they passed away. I was worried about their families who could, as George explained to us, not come to terms with their children dying of HIV/AIDS.

HIV Aids was a big issue in all of the neighbourhoods. George Ruiters, volunteer home-based caregiver who became an important member of our working group of photographers helped people who had HIV Aids with more commitment than most paid social workers. Some of his clients were totally open about their status but most people did not feel safe being photographed. George explained how the pollution from local industries compromised one’s immune system. It was a big problem that many people had tuberculosis and were also affected by air pollution.
Towards a conclusion and further writing

This is new writing that is still very much work in progress. We plan to include more photographs as part of our discussion and more reflection on relevant visual theory is necessary. It has been productive to think about the idea of ‘vernacular’ photography, articulated as part of the theme for this workshop. We are quite critical of this category in relation to our work, at least if conceptualised as a distinct, local, amateur or non-art genre of photography. Where might the boundaries of what can meaningfully be called ‘vernacular’ start and stop? Definitions of what may be meant by the ‘vernacular’ in photography are still very tentative here. But we plan to argue that to distinguish between local popular photographic culture as ‘vernacular’, while Jenny Gordon’s photography is somehow unrelated would be to over-simplify the inter-relationship between ‘environmental’ or ‘social documentary’ portraiture and an older, commercial studio portraiture that still feature strongly in many albums from South Durban homes. Also, the DSPP and the Breathing Spaces exhibition created a complex dynamic between family snapshots and studio photographs, Jenny Gordon’s portraiture and the photographs taken by workshop participants. This involved active collaboration that began to blur the borders between what we first referred to as ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ photography and also of categories such as ‘personal’, ‘family’ and ‘social documentary’.

We will also discuss photographs taken by workshop participants and reflect on our efforts to convey the idea of documenting ‘everyday life’ as part of workshops, drawing on a number of interviews that were conducted over a few years. It will be important to consider the many comments written by visitors to DAG exhibition, who sometimes explained their personal connection to the photographs. We also want to consider how the photographs by workshop participants often consciously sought to document social issues (and their own explanations) and how other photographs were in fact on a continuum with family snapshots and portraits.