Landscape from Below: The Representation of Farmland in Tracey Derrick's *EarthWorks: The Lives of Farm Labourers in the Swartland*.

The fifty-eight photographs of Tracey Derrick's *EarthWorks: The Lives of Farm Labourers in the Swartland* exhibition of 2005 fall roughly into three different types: photographs of labourers at work, portraits of the labourers, and landscapes. In this paper I will touch on the first two groups and then focus on Derrick's representation of farmland.

Another Way of Telling

(Figure 1) At first sight, the *EarthWorks* essay looks like a documentary project, a type of photography that has been extensively criticized in recent times for tending the reproduce the victim status of its subjects.[1] For example, the photograph of Martha Mamputa was intended to show, among other things, something of her state of exhaustion at the end of a long hot day working in the fields; **(Figure 2)** and the photograph of an unnamed man shearing a sheep obviously displays the sense of stress and exhaustion involved in this strenuous activity. The polemical content of other photographs depends upon the caption to be revealed. **(Figure 3)** Thus a photograph of a cabbage-harvesting truck reminds Derrick that the workers' homes on this farm had no inside water or toilets; **(Figure 4)** the mother and child harvesting grapes point

[1] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977); Martha Rosler, 'in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography' in *Martha Rosler: Three Works* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), pp.59-86; and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

to the absence of crèches or child care on the farms; **(Figure 5)** and the grape basket prompts the comment that workers are not protected by masks when they spray grapes with pesticide.[2]

(Figure 6) However, the same photograph through which Derrick wanted to show that sheep-shearing is an exhausting activity is evidence also of extraordinary skill: one cannot help but admire the way that the fleece seems to flow effortlessly from the sheep's body. As a craftsperson herself, Derrick appears to respond to this aspect of her subjects' lives, both recognizing the difficulty and enjoying the sheer expertise. **(Figure 7)** In the series, Derrick manifestly responds to the skill involved not only in shearing, but also in grape-harvesting; **(Figure 8)** tending fruit trees;**(Figure 9)** and cattle-rearing; **(Figure 10)** and she reports with appreciation the boast of Nongakaninani Klaas: "Show me any kind of fruit tree and I can prune it, feed it and harvest it".

John Berger and Jean Mohr's essay *Another Way of Telling* of 1982 suggests that the subjects of Derrick's photographs would approve of these images of themselves at work.[3] When writer and photographer asked the tree-cutter Gaston for permission to take some pictures, he agreed on condition that they show what his *work* is like: Gaston apparently emphasized the word 'work' in order to have both difficulty and skill incorporated in his image; and he was particularly pleased with the set of photographs that showed him felling a tree precisely where he intended it to fall.[4] The photograph that Gaston's wife chose to display on the mantelpiece, meanwhile, was a close-up portrait, not surprisingly, but one that revealed qualities of both alertness in her husband and something of the experience of constant exposure to danger. The other peasant subject that Berger and Mohr interviewed in the process of recording his image was Marcel, an

[2] I am grateful to Tracey Derrick for providing me with the text she wrote for her exhibition, the captions for her photographs, and scans of the photographs themselves.
[3] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, 1982).
[4] 'A Framed Portrait of a Woodcutter', in *Another Way of Telling*, pp.58-71.

Alpine cow-herd.[5] Marcel expressed satisfaction with images that offered straightforward records of things that were important to him – such as his herd of cows, his dog, and his grandson. When it came to his own picture, he declined images of himself at work and, changing into his best clothes, demanded a formal, frontal three-quarter length portrait of which he said 'And now my great grandchildren will know what sort of a man I was'.

(Figure 11) With no knowledge of Berger and Mohr's book, Tracey Derrick also hit on the idea of the formal portrait as a means to record the likeness of her farm-labourer subjects with respect and dignity. This project was accelerated when she was asked to act as official photographer at weddings and birthday celebrations, which, in the context of a documentary project, represents an extraordinary change in role, moving from a position on the outside, as it were, to effectively being commissioned directly by her own subjects. But, like Zwelethu Mthethwa and Pieter Hugo, who also use the conventions of portraiture to provide extraordinary insights into South African society, Derrick transcends the genre and uses it for her own purposes.[6] **(Figure 12)** In the first instance, of course, she uses it to communicate the dignity and humanity of subjects that are habitually over-looked in the media. But she is also able to use certain characteristics of the genre to communicate important information about her subjects. **(Figure 13)** For example, the very formality of the wedding photographs in this age of cell-phones and digital technology indicates a deep conservatism, not just because they look like the wedding portraits that the sitters' parents, even grandparents might have had made, but also in the way it represents the sitters' self-image – like Marcel wanting to preserve an appropriate image for his great grandchildren. **(Figure 14)** Moreover, Derrick appears to have recognized that the more formal the portrait, paradoxically, the more apparent is the sitter's

[5] 'Marcel or the Right to Choose', in *Another Way of Telling*, pp. 16-37.

[6] Okwui Enwezor, 'Photography after the End of Documentary Realism: Zwelethu Mthethwa's Color Photographs' in *Zwelethu Mthethwa* (New York: Aperture, 2010), pp. 100-113, 110, writes of Mthethwa's method that 'Being photographed conferred upon the figure in a portrait the stature of subjecthood'. See also Michael Godby, 'Documentary Portraiture: Zwelethu Mthethwa's Invention of a new Photographic Genre' in *Zwelethu Mthethwa: New Works* (Cape Town: Iart Gallery, 2011), pp. 11-19.

control over the image, the more the sitter has been able to exercise agency: in this image, it was clearly Hein Hendricks decision to display his academic certificates and sporting trophies. **(Figure 15)** For these reasons, Derrick invariably made a formal portrait of a person that she had also photographed at work thus providing a fuller, more rounded image of the individual: **(Figure 16)** these two images represent Hendrik Systers, one of Derrick's main contacts in the community. For all these reasons also, portraits make up about half of the *EarthWorks* project.

EarthWorks and Land

(Figure 17) Significantly, while Derrick intuitively appropriated the art historical genre of portraiture to attribute a full humanity to her farm-worker subjects, her representation of land departs radically from art historical models. Historically, landscape painting has been used to introduce a sense of human order into nature, and to naturalize the idea of land ownership.[7] **(Figure 18)** Early artists in Southern Africa, both painters and photographers, sought to impose European conventions for the representation of space, notably the high viewing point and the structured movement into depth, on unfamiliar terrain as part of the process of bringing it into the European knowledge system, effectively, into colonial possession. **(Figure 19)** Around the middle of the twentieth century, these strategies developed into expressions of nationalistic sentiments, for example, the late abstracted landscapes of J.H. Pierneef which were designed to express the soul of the land and its relationship to the Afrikaner *volk*.[8] **(Figure 20)** What is less well-known is that the lyrical landscapes of Gerard Bhengu and other Black South African artists embody an equally nationalistic sentiment in imaging a pre-colonial landscape, that is a landscape without White settlers. **(Figure 21)** As far as the representation of farms is concerned, there appear to be significant differences between the work of White and Black

[7] On the history of South African landscape representation, see Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); and Michael Godby, *The Lie of the Land: Representations of the South African Landscape*, Cape Town, 2010.
[8] Godby, 'Inventions', pp.110-125 in *The Lie of the Land.*

artists. White artists from Thomas Bowler in the mid- nineteenth century to the early works of Pierneef in the 1920s represented farms as a natural, indeed central part of the national landscape; and, contrary to the realities of the gradual loss of hereditary farms brought about by the capitalization of agriculture and other pressures at this time that are explored in the Afrikaner *plaasroman*, life on farms is suggested to be natural and healthy.[9] **(Figure 22)** A rare Black view of modern agriculture, in Derrick Nxumalo's 'KwaZulu Modern Farm', on the other hand, suggests a completely dissonant relationship between the farm buildings and their natural surroundings.[10] **(Figure 23)** A similar distinction, which is based obviously not on race but on historical relationships to the land, may be found between Black and White treatments of farm labour. While representations of peasant labour by such Black artists as George Pemba seem to insist on the communal nature of the task at hand and the prospect of shared profits, **(Figure 24)** Tracey Derrick's *EarthWorks* series suggests that labour on farms in the Western Cape is being performed by a class of serfs that is virtually bonded to the capitalist owner: Oom Paul Heyns, who died at the age of 52 soon after this photograph was taken from a cancer quite likely induced by pesticides, is depicted against a field of cabbages that is manifestly too large for any single person's use and too large for any single person to tend. Thus, where John Berger and Jean Mohr's alpine farmer Marcel rejoiced in photographs of his cows simply because they were his, the farm labourers of the Swartland cannot relate in this way to either the land itself or the forms of agriculture practiced on it. In Derrick's vision, they can simply take pride in their skills and accomplishments; and they can take pride in their families and their homes.

(Figure 25) Over the past few decades, South African painters and photographers have drawn attention to the baleful consequences of the capitalization of agriculture, both in the devastating

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[9] J.M. Coetzee, 'The Farm Novels of C.M. van den Heever', pp.82-114 in *White Writing: The Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Sandton: Radix, 1988.
[10] Godby, 'Interventions', pp.90-109 in *The Lie of the Land*.

impact of the several monocultures, such as sugar-cane farming, on the natural environment, **(Figure 26)** and the destruction of produce that is deemed necessary to maintain market prices: these critiques are invariably expressed in terms of conventional representations of landscape. Significantly, over this same period, these pictorial conventions have been either ignored or deliberately challenged.[11] **(Figure 27)** On the one hand, certain artists, such as John Muafangejo, employ an entirely intuitive approach to the representation of land, changing viewing points at will and employing cartographical amongst other representational devices within the same image. **(Figure 28)** And, on the other hand, artists such as William Kentridge, Penny Siopis, and Christine Dixie engage directly with historical methods in attempts to disrupt the relationship between landscape and land ownership. In his *Colonial Landscape* series, for example, Kentridge introduces surveyors' marks into his versions of nineteenth-century travel illustrations to demonstrate the historical connection between description and appropriation. **(Figure 29)** And Christine Dixie presents the Eastern Cape landscape that is being surveyed by her large foreground figure in the steel engraving technique that was used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe colonial expansion into this territory by the *Illustrated London News*.

(Figure 30) Tracey Derrick's approach to landscape is less theoretical than these artists, but she also eliminates all picturesque elements from the *EarthWorks* project. She also refuses to celebrate the idea of property: the fence in this photograph of a farm at Riebeeksrivier appears less to demarcate the limits of any property, or even field, than to present a difficult and unpleasant obstacle to the view. In most of her photographs, land is simply a backdrop to the farm labour taking place within it, but occasionally it is given its own dire identity. **(Figure 31)** The photograph of a windmill, for example, reminds one that water is a scarce and vulnerable resource. Without water, the landscape is harsh and unforgiving. **(Figure 32)** Moreover, the elements in this landscape are hostile, constantly eroding the work of human hands. And

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[11] Godby, 'Interrogations', pp.126-135 in *The Lie of the Land*.

agriculture is shown to be not only difficult but also somehow out of joint with nature: **(Figure 33)** in connection with the photograph of a wheat field also at Riebeeksrivier, Derrick notes that 'Planes spray pesticide, the drift spreads to a two kilometer radius': but the ruthless nature of the farming project is apparent already in the aesthetic form of the image with its lack of horizon and aggressive texture. **(Figure 34)** Other images of corn fields appear equally stark by refusing the expected gradual movement into depth and insisting on the rough materiality of farm produce. **(Figure 35)** Similarly, close up images of corn stooks give a sense of the difficulty of apprehending these awkward, heavy and bristling objects; **(Figure 36)** and the disorientating elimination of distance that this close perspective would entail. **(Figure 37)** Similarly, Derrick's photograph of a dairy herd ignores all art historical precedent for this potentially bucolic scene and presents it without order and, crucially, without sentiment. Derrick's photographs appear to capture not the appearance of the farm as it might be surveyed by its owners, but the experience of working in it; not the pleasure of looking from a distance at the farm landscape but the reality of being in it. There are several formal changes in the manner of representing landscape but chief amongst them is the difference, highlighted by Kentridge, Dixie and others, between looking down from a commanding viewpoint at an extensive terrain and apprehending with Tracey Derrick in this essentially new visual language, landscape from below. By formal and other means, therefore, the farm landscape is shown to be unnatural and hostile, the result of the capitalization of agriculture that depends on the use of fertilizers, pesticides, hormones – and equally toxic labour relations.

(Figure 38) In the *EarthWorks* essay, however, Tracey Derrick has deliberately drawn attention to the one kind of landscape where farm labourers can assert pride of possession and pride in their own productivity. An organization called the Goedgedacht Agricultural Resource Centre provides support for small-holdings and allotments in townships such as Illingu Lethu, outside Malmesbury. **(Figure 39)** Derrick attached to the portrait she made of Kotyi Taliwe his statement

on the value of working one's own land: 'I am 72 years old and am very happy to be working with the soil, still using my hands and eating from my work'. **(Figure 40)** Similarly, Winnie Fischer, who is also a beneficiary of the Goedgedacht scheme, is shown in the vegetable garden from which she feeds her family and which, for the photographer, seems to serve as a model of food-production that is ultimately more sustainable than regular industrial-scale agriculture in economic, environmental and social terms. **(Figure 41)**

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Illustrations

1. Tracey Derrick, ‘Sheep shearing’, 2004, *EarthWorks* series.
2. Tracey Derrick, ‘Paul and Jaena Johnson’, 2003, *EarthWorks* series.
3. Tracey Derrick, ‘Wheatfield at Riebeeksrivier’, 2004, *EarthWorks* series.
4. Tracey Derrick, ‘Oom Paul Heyns’, 2002, *EarthWorks* series.
5. Tracey Derrick, ‘Winnie Fischer in her garden’, 2004, *EarthWorks* series.