

# Documentary methods, trust building and contact creating activities in Brynhild Bye-Tiller's artistic practice

*Thank you for inviting me. Thank you Brita for finding me on facebook and asking me to come. Coming her is exciting and a challenge to me. So today what I'm going to do is talk about my artistic work with photography and participation. I modified my talk a bit, usually when I visit schools I try to relate to the students, to put myself in their shoes, and saying I was in the same spot as they are in now, and take them through step by step what happend to me in school and after school. This time you are students in another field but as I understand you have a specific focus on participatory methodologies, which IS a part of social art practices. Parts of my artistic practice is based on participation. The other half on photography and documentary work. So we have some things in common. The title of my talk today is "Documentary methods, trust building and contact creating activities in Brynhild Bye-Tiller's artistic practice." I'll talk about my process, what kind of methods and tools I use, what matters most to me and, where I'm going.*

“Documentary methods” may be a confusing concept but if we look at science, “documentary methods” describes different ways of collecting a material. This can be done by observing, retrieving statistics, reading letters, documents, interviews, or as I do; participatory observation. I participate directly in the environment for periods of time. I stay with those I photograph for some time to establish trust. This is crucial. The longer the better. The tools I use for my projects are multidimensional. Colour photography for my visual work. I do audio recordings of conversations & interviews. Sometimes I do video. I write and rewrite texts to pinpoint my focus and I make photo books.

The more I work and the longer I do this, I see that photography has shaped my life. My photography and my life go hand in hand. Whatever I'm doing and experiencing in my life, it just naturally tends to be what I'm photographing. Photography has guided my choices in life. Where I go. What I see and how I connect with people. Taking photographs and talking to people has become a way of relating to the world, a way of existing, and a way to take a stance towards reality. My participatory methods are based on photography. The work goes in periods. So what I want to do today is to go through some of this periods and some of the influences which has shaped my work.

The first image I'll show is from my latest project 100 METER. Children and adolescents were asked to make a video self portrait while walking their favourite 100 metres and explaining their choice. 400 video selfies were made and the material was exhibited this summer. What kind of stories came up about where we walk and why we walk in today's society? Some walk because they have to, others because they want to. The issue was how can walking redefine our perception of aesthetic experiences? What are we looking for? Through participating in a common democratic act based on the participants' own thoughts about walking, topics such as borders, globalization, movement, freedom, and migration were brought up. Such themes relates to art and politics. A project like this affects art's ability to comment on social and political conditions and the role of art in a democracy and in community development. Organizing participants, in this case children and adolescents, as part of an art work, corresponds to a democratic political process. I'll play a few seconds from one of the videos.

*[bilde media thule]* But first let me rewind twelve years to the time when I started to use participatory methods. This is an image from Tjeldsund municipality in Ofoten. I worked as a producer for Artistic Interruptions Art in Nordland and Artscape Nordland, which are two large site-specific art projects, both with multiple productions and with international artists in collaboration with the municipalities, towns, and communities of Nordland County. Artscape Nordland is a plein air collection of sculptures. The idea is that a work of art, with its presence, creates its own place. It is a collection of traditional sculptures with one exception: Media Thule by Olafur Gisslasson (1995). He built a house, a place where visitors can stay for a while, and reflect upon the landscape of the fjord and the mountains. The visitors are asked to draw or describe his or her ideas and experiences and then put these up on the walls. In turn, these drawings and notes serve as greetings to other visitors, and the process becomes a dialogue between the spectators. The house or sculpture is made for all people who are willing to write down their thoughts or make a drawing of the landscape, or for people who just want to visit the place. So this was one of my first experiences with another kind of art, a kind of art which is made by human relations and where the visitors are invited to participate in an art work. Note! This was before Nicolas Bourriaud published his book about relational aesthetics.

*[bilde bolga]* The other project, Artistic Interruptions, was much more process- and dialogue-based than the predecessor Artscape Nordland. Artists were invited to work with local communities to create productions or interruptions together with them. Artistic Interruptions examined issues relating to the local context, the function of art in the contemporary world, and on a more theoretical level discussing "site-specificity" as an artistic genre and strategy. The produced artworks are intended to counter conservative notions of cultural identity. I quote Per Gunnar Tverbakk, the project leader: "There are very few people from Nordland who have been in a 'sjark', which is a small traditional fishing boat", end quote. By focusing on current processes of change, both social and economical changes, the

project posed a challenge to the nostalgia for the past and wanted to make a contribution to identities of the future. "Folk på Bolga" in Meløy municipality was the first production made by the artists Torill Goksøy and Camilla Martens. They asked: What's the future like for this island? The 130 local residents found that fishing is a trade that gradually will disappear and they don't know which industry will take over. Maybe tourism will replace fishing?. An old fisherman characterized the island as a paradise, while recognizing that the original coastal environment will eventually be reduced to scenography for tourists. The artists stayed on the island for some time, they talked, met and discussed the future with the locals. They lived in a house at the harbour and one result of their production was a children's theatre performance called "The Troll and the Fishing Girl". It was performed by children at Bolga. The children made the costumes and scenography themselves, they were assigned roles that are typical of Northern Norwegian adventures: trolls, fishermen and birds.

*[bilde myre]* In the beginning of Artscape Nordland the public was very negative and critical, both in terms of the concept, the costs and the idea that international art would be introduced in the local community in a time of industrial crisis in the region. In the other project Artistic Interruptions, dialogue and cooperation with the public were an important strategy. We used a lot of time to conversations and planning together with the communities. In return, we gained confidence, which was very encouraging. Time and dialogue is a key factor to successfully involve different communities and individuals.

Both projects influenced me a lot. The social turn in the art field inspired me. I was exposed to the contemporary art scene outside Trondheim. I discovered that art could be something else. Something different from paintings or sculptures like the ones in Artscape Nordland. Art could be a process, a meeting, or a conversation. At the time I did not fully grasp that idea. It was new to me. Even so, during this time I slowly found my artistic voice. I think we all go through certain crises. We have an internal struggle where we have to change gear, to come back to ourselves, to be honest. This was my tipping point.

*[bilde bodø]* Another equally important influence was the international photographic scene. I participated in master classes in documentary photography. I met some of the greatest photographers of our time. Photographer Alex Webb taught me a special way to think about the surface. He said each part of an image should be activated. I started capturing people in different non-staged situations. I started to think about layers of meaning, layers of stories in one single image. This image represents this transition period. It's a sunny day in Bodø, in the middle of the street. I've captured the movements in front of my camera lens. A woman walks by in sandals, carrying a shopping bag. A blue stuffed animal is thrown into the air, a boy passes at high speed. His t-shirt flutters, there are guests at the outdoor café and a sand volleyball net and the exterior of a hotel in the background. I asked myself:

Do people know each other or do they just pass each other. They don't look at each other. We can't see their faces. They are hidden. They head in different directions. I did not talk to them or engage with them in any way. I just observed. I was shy. Many photographers are shy. Not all, but many.

[*bilder*] During this period I changed my focus from formal matters to the narrative aspects in my photographic work. Purely formal issues like colour, shapes and structures became less interesting. I tried to find a way to see things more clearly through the camera lens. To see the ones who deserve attention. To tell stories about someone or a social issue that might make the world a better place for all of us. To take pictures of people when they have a credible energy. When they are themselves. Without a mask. Also called the authentic photography which has often been used as a truth witness which is a cornerstone of the documentary format. It's also a cliché, but even so important because it affects ethical issues and a responsibility to show the world as it may be. Perhaps more than ever considering how the photograph can be misused with underlying motives. Documentary photo is based on a strong humanitarian tradition where photography is used to document distress and suffering. Through this you can highlight certain parts of society – and create change. Without manipulating. Without staging or “cleaning up”. No hocus pocus. It's visual storytelling according to journalistic principles. The starting point is really a kind of lingua franca – an image language understood by everyone, regardless of nationality, a language which has many similarities with literature. Liz Wells, British professor of photography, says: "*For more than a century, social activists have used documentary photography as a highly persuasive tool for implementing social change through the use of the photo as a credible document that investigates and reveals social unworthy conditions.* "

BUT to tell a story you need to meet people. You need to talk with them. To engage with them. To look them in the eyes. People you have never met before. So the next step was to get closer to my photographic objects. To find the courage to talk with people and get in front of them with the lens. I travelled subway 5 in Oslo from Grorud to Oslo S back and forth talking and shooting. Since then I developed techniques to Create Instant Intimacy – to take better pictures. Another strategy was to invite different groups of people to participate in my art projects. This made it easier to get access. Also I was no longer satisfied to speak on behalf of someone else in the documentary work. I invited others to bring or to take their own photos to represent a broader range of views on the topics in question. I started with dual exhibitions. My documentary and the participants' material. Allowing others to make visual representation in a public space challenged who is allowed to do so and brings up the issues of democratization and visual activism.

[*bilde*] All employees at a large health and care institution were given the chance to participate in my first participatory project WOMEN IN HEALTH- AND CARE WORK (2006-2008). The project

examined issues concerning art's instrumental role for social change, documentary methods and female professions in rural areas. The introduction, the first meeting, was important. As it always is. How to inspire. How to persuade them to participate. These are people with a very busy schedule. The participants were from different departments like dementia, nursing homes, open care, cleaning, kitchen, laundry and administration. Why should they participate? None of them were initially interested in art. All my projects are based on voluntary participation. So the challenge is to get the right people on board. You need to have a presentation, a schedule, all the legal paperwork ready and most important, to present a specific task like "Take a photo of what care work means to you". We had a date for the final exhibition, which we made together and the participants were invited to add their own material. This time I gave them disposable cameras. We organized a working group with representatives from the employees and the municipality. I moved into the institution and started taking photographs of the employees in their work environment. This was my first time shooting in an institution. It was scary. How to meet them. How to make them relax in front of the camera lens. I didn't want to disturb them. I made appointments with different individuals and followed them for an hour or less. I also interviewed them. During the project, absence due to sickness amongst employees went down from 20% to 13 %. Which is a lot. This had never happened before. Later on it returned to the original level. The question is why? I made a report and the employees felt seen and appreciated, according to the survey. This fits very well with the Hawthorne effect, which refers to the phenomenon that was documented in connection with the Hawthorne studies in the US in the 1920s, namely that to be examined in itself produces behavioural changes which evaporate again when the investigation is over. We also received very good press coverage. That always helps make participants take ownership of the project.

Since the first project I've met many people and tried to get under their skin, often in the course of a very short period of time. Engaging others, meeting people in a decent and user-friendly way is a key part of the work. The goal is that the participants will gain a greater awareness of things. That they get some kind of pay-off. As in life, it's absolutely crucial to give of one's self, to be humble, curious, and harmless. It requires courage to stand in front of the lens, and the camera is big and visible. It helps to acknowledge that not everyone necessarily likes to be photographed and to tell them that I don't necessarily aim to take "nice smiling" pictures. The next project, another institution with brave participants, was INVISIBLE VISIBLE (2010-2011) Around 14 employees in a kindergarten were portrayed by me, and they participated in a large number of activities. Again the issue was related to the profession. According to themselves, they were only seen as caregivers. Not as professionals. The question was: Can art form an opinion or change an opinion? One of several activities was to make an outdoor photo exhibition with photos taken by the employees. Every household in the village of Lauvsnes and Vik got one picture attached to the wall. In total 288 households. This was a big step for many of the employees. To display work-related pictures from the kindergarten in public in a village

where everyone knew everyone, was scary. They made visible what they actually do, which differs a great deal from the biased, trivializing kindergarten clichés. The documentation is also of a permanent nature. The employee photographs were assembled into a collage, and given to the town hall. Politicians have been met the project through lectures, audio recordings and pictures. We made a book together and projected the material on the wall of Flatanger sports hall during an outdoor event. Susan Sontag said: "To talk about something gives something meaning" end quote. A particular experience happened in this project which I suppose there's a chance that you'll meet as well. There was a frustration among the employees about the management and the relationship with the elementary school in the neighbouring building. So, issues located outside the art project emerged during the project. There was an expectation that the art project could fix this. I was sorry to disappoint them. But even art has its limits. In the art field there has been, and still is, a debate about the degree of instrumentalisation - where art becomes incorporated in politically motivated initiatives and programs. Giving art assignments far outside its range and at the expense of the autonomy of art. Traditionally, artists and politicians have different views on what art should be. On the other hand community art gives art institutions an opportunity to interact with the public in new ways. Again this was something I understood gradually and I was happy to read about an American curator called Mary Jane Jacob. She says: "The question is not instrumentality or not, but instrumentality for what purpose. Art can and should be an instrument for social change.

[*bilde fotokurs*] This period was about highlighting skills based on gender. Skills that are often not appreciated or seen by society. The participatory methodologies of inviting people to participate were developed gradually. Such methods are part of participatory art. Or dialogue-based art, processual art or community art. It has many names that all indicate that there are many participants involved, as opposed to one-to-one relationship. Through these methods a new material is introduced as art that wasn't art before. The new material can be conversations, values, intentions or attitudes. Intangible values. It can be political, existential or something deeply human that is often difficult to capture. The new material differs from what most people perceive as art, namely the static object, an image, or a sculpture. To explain this for the participants I usually give a short lecture about my artistic practice in the beginning of a project which helps to communicate what we are suppose to do together and why these methods are in fact art.

In INVISIBLE VISIBLE (2010-2011) I conducted a photo workshop for the first time. Documenting activities in the kindergarten is a part of the curriculum. Since the first workshop this has become one of my most important methods. The workshops are part of the projects. It's about meeting people. It's about learning something through photography. It's about gaining knowledge. It's about expressing something through an image and taking the opportunity of letting your voice be heard. Participants are ordinary people with hardly any knowledge of art. In the beginning I give them specific tasks in order

to make things easier. The participants become both photographic motives and photographers. They are both in front of and behind the camera, usually after a brief introductory to shutter, aperture, focus, composition, lighting etc. Photo workshops as a method or visual work in general also allows illiterate participants to participate. I've seen that several times like in the projects BRIDGING ZIP-CODE (2016), THREE WAYS OF FRAMING (2013) and MY HOME (2012-2013). In these projects I invited refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants to participate. The issue was mapping the situation for immigrant women married to Norwegian men in rural communities, investigating art's instrumental role in creating meeting places and strengthening the integration of immigrants.

*[bilde other activities]* All kinds of activities we do together build confidence. Not only photography. In FORGO (2012-2012) immigrants were asked to embroider something they had abstained from in life. We arranged embroidery workshops in cooperation with local women's groups. The embroideries were assembled and eventually turned into walls in a wooden house structure. IN THESE WERE NOT CHOSEN (2011) the audience were asked to comment on the local newspaper's choice of photography in an editorial article and to vote for the picture they thought was best suited for the story. In APERTURA NAMDALSEID (2016) I drove around with a scanner in my car, made appointments in advance and collected old historical photographs from people during several home visits. In THREE WAYS OF FRAMING I arranged a guided tour in the abandoned mine Vestgruven for refugees in small community they knew very little about. In BRIDGING ZIP CODE (2016) asylum seekers was asked to build a house structure in the towns square and to set up a public display of photography inside the house at a spring fair. Literally building a new life. In the end they got a diploma. Formally to acknowledge participation is a good thing. In a workshop with students of mental Health Care we're making an exhibition together. In 100 METERS (2017-2018) children and youth were asked to make a video self portrait. I did about 30 workshops in different schools and other places where children meet after school. In RAMALLAH TRONDHEIM SERIES (2012-2017) a football team from Palestine was invited to Trondheim to participate in the Scandia Cup and play a friendship match against Trondheims-Ørn. In MY HOME (2012-2013) new and old inhabitants in a rural community came along on a home-visit relay where the theme of the discussions was: "What is your home? Where is your home?" The participants were initially unknown to each other. During the relay they got a new "family". Home visits have become another important method. Visiting different homes makes me less prejudiced. We are all people independent of social class. Seeing different kind of homes or living situations gives me a chance to experience diversity, to establish contact and it gives me freedom.

*[bilde ewald]* It's not a new thing to involve "ordinary people" in the art field. Neither with video nor photography. The American photographer Wendy Ewald has encouraged her participants, children, families, and teachers, to use the camera for more than 40 years. She even lets participants choose

which of her own pictures that should be included in the exhibition, to challenge the idea of who really takes a photography. In the 1960s, participants often received a task and they knew what the result would be in advance. Today participatory projects open up to a greater degree of co-determination and flow throughout the process towards a result, in my case towards a dual exhibitions - one part made by the participants and one part made by me. [*bilde*]

I always use photography in some way. I have spent many years learning storytelling using pictures in a conventional way and developing myself as a traditional documentary photographer. I have deliberately developed thought patterns about how I move around a photographic object and how to capture movements in front of the camera lens in the three-dimensional composition. I've asked myself: "What subtle, quiet and built-in thoughts and decisions are present in my photographic work." You however don't need to use photography. There are many possibilities to include others. There are lots of community artists and urbanists who produce inspiring work. [*bilde screen shots*]

[*bilde*] The simplest form of documentary photo can be seen in RAMALLAH TRONDHEIM SERIES. This is a picture of a souvenir shelf in a Palestinian home. The photograph is a credible documentation of what the owner possessed if something should be stolen. That's photography as a document and photography as proof. The slightly more advanced international photo journalism usually consists of about 20 images per story in colour or black and white. They may also be accompanied by video or a sound track. A documentary is not necessarily time-dependent of what's going on here and now, but it can be about things you're interested in, where you go deep into a topic. Often you say in journalism: "If it bleeds it leads", for example covering a demonstration or another dramatic event. But reporting normality can be just as important as all the bleeding. What's documented affects the documentary's community assignment, the public conversation and the media as the fourth state power. Who controls the conversation and who decides what people are talking about? In particular, this is relevant in another area I have worked in: the Middle East, where the struggle for reputation is evident on all sides and where the density of journalists per square meter is the highest in the world. During my Middle East projects, I asked myself: How is it possible to tell a new story from this area, which has not been told before? After 70 years of conflict, we feel we know all the stories from Israel/Palestine. How to avoid the clichés - and find your own story? That was the starting point for one of my previous projects in Palestine. How can I avoid the stereotypes? How to nuance the image that the media presents?

Two of the series were displayed in public in Trondheim last year. THE TRUTH ON THE GROUND with 37 pictures printed on metal, mounted on 32 stone slopes around the sundial in the north-eastern part of the town square. Another series was AWAY GAME with nine portraits displayed in the bell tower of the church Vår Frue. The same material was on display in the Middle East in 2015. [*bilde*] To



be portrayed also gives ownership to the process but the question is whether a story, a photo, or several photos can change us? Can photography change our opinion at all? These questions are part of a great discussion about the impact of images, triggered in the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015, featuring the photograph of a dead three-year-old Syrian boy at the waterfront. [image] This picture affected many emotionally, but did it lead to any practical changes? Today, the attitudes towards migration have changed and we are experiencing a strong rise of populism and nationalism. Donald Trump has attempted to remove the credibility from the documentary photograph by rejecting the pictures that showed the number of attendants during his presidential inauguration. He has given us the term Fake news. How to seek truth in the area of fake news has become frighteningly relevant. However, most people would say that this has more to do with the person Trump than with documentary qualities.

A Palestinian organization was my partner in RAMALLAH TRONDHEIM SERIES. A Palestinian football team from this organization joined the project. The issue was whether photography can change the narratives around Arab women. How does photography influence our understanding of both the role of women and women's opportunities to participate in sports in the Middle East? The first meeting with the players was in a small bus on the road to an away game in Jericho. [Sound] The project lasted for more than five years. Initially, I wanted to focus on documentary work with no participation, but things happened and I changed my plans accordingly. One activity led to another which is a hallmark of participatory projects. They grow. The question is how to take care of the growth. How to let new activities occur as a result of art, happen intuitively and become a part of the whole while maintaining a space for aesthetic decisions. After all, a result is expected at the end of the process.

[bilder] The last completed project 100 METER marks a period of 12 years with collaboration with different institutions, organizations, municipalities, colleagues, and a large number of different groups of people. This kind of projects is not possible to complete by myself. I told you walking in this project brought up topics such as borders, globalization, movement, freedom, and migration were brought up, but to be honest the participants spoke very little about those things. They talked about everyday concerns. But when I displayed the videos in the exhibition the context was different something else happened.

The exhibition consisted of 1 video work (70 min with video-selfportraits from children and adolescents who film themselves while telling about a short stretch of ground they have strong feelings for) 18 photo works, including 12 small-format colour portraits, 1 documentary series, 1 book, 1 text-based work, 124 sheets of paper, 1 paper model, 1 photographic sculpture and 15 selfie sticks.

The exhibition was a professional highlight for me. For the first time I managed to put documentary and participation together in one space. I managed to put the *convergences and crossovers between the different but increasingly intertwined parts together*. The participation compared to previous projects was different. The co-determination was on an administrative level, with my partners. Not with the participants although there was a high degree of participation. 400 video selfies were made. The project was a high-threshold offer because it was based on consent and technique. In this period the European and Norwegian laws regulating privacy changed. This affected the attitude I met from the institutions. It's important to remember: Participation does not have to be digital. There are a lot of low tech possibilities, even in photography.

For me there is always this photography thing going on. It never stops. I approach my artistic work as an opportunity to explore this obsession and consequently I am working directly with others. I invite people to participate and teach them how to express themselves through photography. I explore various methods of participating, and I continue to develop new projects. I collaborate and collect documentary material. What matters to me is showing what lies below the surface, capturing the essence of people through my lens. Engaging with the participants or a community in a useful way, so that they can gain a greater awareness about things. Subtle things can sometimes surface such as concerns regarding the authenticity of the documentary material, ethical issues, and the democratization of voices by challenging the concept of who is allowed to tell stories in a public space.

I'm not concerned with the boundaries between photography and participation. I simply put them next to each other. This creates tension, which can be frustrating but which also serves as a method of creating art. I deliberately alternate between photography and participation because somewhere between these two areas is where I find unknown territory. Therein lies the art. Therein lies the ambiguity and the experiences that arise as I am getting to know the world. It's an open and new area that provides opportunities for development. By tapping into this area that has no beginning or end, I strive to take full advantage of the social interaction behind an image and thereby give something back to those who participate -- while creating art. While taking photographs.