

Article

Poetic Storytelling in Contemporary Photography. Relation to Nature and the Poesis of Everyday Life in Works of Selected Artist in Iceland and Other Nordic Countries

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Abstract: The past 20 years have seen a shift in Icelandic photography from postmodern aesthetics towards a more phenomenological perspective that explores the relationship between subjective and affective truth on the one hand, and the outside world on the other hand. Rather than telling a story about the world as it is or as the photographer wants it to appear, the focus is on communicating with the world, and with the viewer. The photograph is seen as a creative medium that can be used to reflect how we experience and make sense of the world, or how we are and dwell in the world. In this paper, I introduce the theme of poetic storytelling in the context of contemporary photography in Iceland and other Nordic Countries. Poetic storytelling is a term I have been developing to describe a certain lyrical way to use a photograph as a narrative medium in reaction to the climate crisis and to a general lack of relation to oneself and to the world in times of increased acceleration in the society. In my article I analyze works by a few leading Icelandic photographers (Katrín Elvarsdóttir, Heiða Helgadóttir and Hallgerður Hallgrímsdóttir) and put them in context with works by artists from Denmark (Joakim Eskildsen, Christina Capetillo and Astrid Kruse Jensen), Sweden (Helene Schmitz) and Finland (Hertta Kiiski) artists within the frame of poetic storytelling. Poetic storytelling is about a way to use a photograph as a narrative medium in an attempt to grasp a reality which is neither fully objective nor subjective, but rather a bit of both.

Keywords: photography; poetic storytelling; phenomenology; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Jacques Derrida; Luce Irigaray; Hartmut Rosa

1. Beginning

By her small hand, I lead my daughter through the autumn leaves on the ground of a beautiful city park in Europe. She is eight years old. Her bright and unruly hair caresses her shoulders. Somewhere along the way we buy a white cap with the caption *miłość*. It means love in Polish. Some autumn leaves are yellow and brown but most are red. We kick some leaves around. We come to a halt to pick up a chestnut. It is soft to the touch, cold and shiny but becomes warm in the palm of a hand. We pocket the nut, we make it a wishing stone, a lucky charm.

Such walks in the company of a child through European city parks in the colors of autumn are a welcome respite for an adult, constantly reading about global warming, sexual abuse, war and refugees. Everywhere, the news reports are the same. The reality of which they speak is darkness. It is good to raise your eyes, to lead a small person through the lungs of a big city, and see the world anew, to remember to notice the small things and even to find some faith in the world. Each day is new—invaluable.

2. To Have Faith in the World

Between Holding my Breath and Letting It Go

To an extent, the photographic medium is concerned with time and the human effort to either preserve what has passed or throw some particular threads from the flow of time into relief. In our daily lives, we experience reality as a whole; we look, we listen, we touch, we sense temperature changes and odors, we move in space, we take objective account of time while also having a subjective sense of time that dictates how fast or slowly we perceive the flow of reality. The photograph can both interrupt that flow but also compress it within a circumscribed moment, the intersection of time.

One can observe in Icelandic contemporary photography of the last 10 to 15 years, a certain tendency to address these poetic moments; when reality and our perception of it coincide in such a way that the subjective and the objective are not easily told apart (Sigurðardóttir and Sveinsson 2008; Sigurðardóttir and Sigurjónsdóttir 2020). Not only are the photographs informed by an external reality; they also communicate a strong poetic sense for the world and the ways in which both mind and body experience the workings of time.¹

This brings the works of Icelandic photographers very much in step with important trends in Nordic photography where, more often than not, human responsibility towards nature in times of climate change is cast in bold relief. In what follows, I will pick up an important thread of both Nordic and Icelandic photography in the 21st century; the presence of nature and the photographer's personal relationship to her environment and to the world she would like to take part in creating. I use the term poetic storytelling to describe a phenomenological approach towards the world around us, where the relationship and the dialogue between subject and object are crucial for understanding the world and adding meaning to it. The photographer is therefore both aware of and reflective about her or his perspective as an embodied being and how her or his embodiment is part of the work created. Simultaneously, she or he is engaged in the project of telling a story, making the viewer an active participant in the project. Like Walter Benjamin explains: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he, in turn, makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale". (Benjamin 1999b, p. 87) In a story, gaps are left unexplained and by using the term poetic storytelling to describe the relevant photographs I want to stress how the focus is not on objective perspective but on ambiguity; the photographs do not tell a complete story, they encourage the viewer to get involved, or in Benjamin's words. "It is left up to him [the reader, the viewer] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information [i.e., the objective approach] lacks" (ibid., p. 89).

In this context, I will analyze the work of three Icelandic photographers, Katrín Elvarsdóttir (b. 1964), Hallgerður Hallgrímsdóttir (b. 1984) and Heiða Helgadóttir (b. 1975) and look at their work in context with works by Danish, Swedish and Finnish photographers, that is Joakim Eskildsen (b. 1971), Christina Capetillo (b. 1964), Astrid Kruse Jensen (b. 1975), Helene Schmitz (b. 1960) and Hertta Kiiiski (b. 1973). The theoretical context of my study is based on texts on phenomenology, post-humanism and psychoanalysis—as well as references to the works of Icelandic writer Gyrðir Elíasson. My analysis is not supposed to explain recent trends in Icelandic and Nordic photography but rather to throw some light on important factors that are quite characteristic for both Icelandic and Nordic art photography today. Unfortunately, this study does not, at the time being, include artists from Norway, Greenland or the Faroe Islands but that is something that I intend to include in further research on the theme.

¹ Poetic and lyrical approaches to photography have of course been seen before in the works of different photographers. In a lecture at Yale University, Walker Evans described the aesthetics of his work as lyric documentary. For further discussion on the term see (Ciezaadlo 2009; Maltz-Leca 2011).

In the autumn of 2017, works by the Danish photographer and architect Christina Capetillo were exhibited in Møstings hus in Copenhagen under the title *The Archive of the Anthropocene*.² The exhibition presented photographs of places that can be described as white spots on a map, that is, places that are neither described as nature nor as a man-made environment. In her photographs Capetillo focuses on how contemporary landscape is characterized by humans attempting to secure themselves from nature, for example, by making dams and ditches to minimize the impact of floods which are, in coherence with climate change, becoming ever more frequent and intense. We see a close-up of the mud on a construction site in a black and white photograph where it seems that the photographer is entering a quiet conversation with the ground she is standing on, and in another photograph, she takes the viewer to a bridge, overlooking deserted trails which have been taken over by vegetation and small pine trees. The photographs have a tangible texture. Even though we can sense the photographer's perspective in the photographs, it is a quiet perspective, like the photographer is listening to the voice of the landscape in front of her. Does it have something to tell us? In her work, Capetillo raises some questions on the situation and where it will bring us. How will we, in the coming future, look upon nature, and the natural context we are part of? Will the man-made environment distance itself evermore from the natural environment of which it always must be a part? How will we see the horizon in the future? Capetillo's work *The Archive of the Anthropocene* is a logical follow-up of her previous projects (Capetillo 2012). In those works, Capetillo seeks a balance between objective observation and a romantic approach towards nature, with clear references to both the pictorialism of romantic landscape photography and to "sober observations of, if you will, objectively-oriented photography", as Tau explains (Thau 2012). The post-anthropocentric perspective, so prevalent in her 2017 exhibition at Møstings hus, is radiating the same aesthetics—with an additional moment of danger in times of climate catastrophe.

True despair certainly defines some urgent problems facing the 21st century—but behind the dark image of the world that can be seen in contemporary photography, one can also notice a certain belief in a better world, a world filled with more beauty and respect for all living things. The Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen formulates it thus: "I find it important to believe that the world can become better, to believe in humanity, and to believe that there is a purpose to all of this. The world is full of problems—wars, diseases, poverty and pollution. Therefore, optimism requires a great deal of concentration".³ In this poetic vision, reflected in Eskildsen's words and works, one can notice a certain type of love or care for the physical world around us and for the people with whom we share this reality.

3. Back to Nature

Nature offers shelter from the harassment of our times, but it also symbolizes the darkness within ourselves. It is that warm bosom providing shelter, yet it is both unpredictable and unforeseen. In nature, we need constantly to stay alert, but also to preserve the capacity for amazement, for being filled with wonder, for respecting what we do not control. We need to realize how nature nurtures us, how we change it and, when the worst befalls, how we destroy it; without ever being fully in control of what we do. Nature is larger than us; much larger—and the silent *flâneur* who does not only wander in the city anymore but seeks to establish new connections in the forest or in a grassy glade must constantly stay alert. Much like the 19th-century *flâneur* who praised the wonders of the city (Benjamin 1999a), the silent observer of the 21st century creates in nature stories which are concerned with nature itself, trees, moors, swamps, rocks and one's own interaction with all of those wonders that seem to promise that after all, it is possible to survive in this world where climate change caused by

² See information on Møstings hus at <https://www.moestingshus.dk/udstillinger-tidligere/capetillo-tidligere> and an article on the exhibition, "Grufuld skønhed I gråtoner" in IDOART, <https://www.idoart.dk/blog/grufuld-skoenhed-i-graatoner>.

³ (Eskildsen 2015). For more information on Eskildsen's work see e.g., (Eskildsen 2009, 2016; Moroz 2016). Eskildsen's webpage is to be found on: <http://www.joakimeskildsen.com/>.

human activity, war and an ever-growing number of people seeking asylum, create existential despair and fear.

At present, as the results of climate change have begun to affect the daily lives of millions of people and the fear of the destructive power of humans has become ingrained in the lives of many Western children, one may realize a heightened sense for the need of cultivating a relationship with nature, one that serves to reinforce both the connection with oneself and with one's environment. This emphasis is clearly pronounced in the works of contemporary photographers around the world. In the spirit of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, one might observe that this need belongs to our episteme, and can be seen as reasonable reactions to the high-speed technological society we live in.⁴ This emphasis on a relationship with nature and the environment is not only related to the Anthropocene, that is the epoch "when the human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet",⁵ and the increasing emphasis on seeing man as part of nature, but also to a yet deeper and more sensitive understanding of nature, related to both posthumanism and a post-anthropocentrism. Rosi Braidotti explains the core of the spirit with these words: "Post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for "Man" as the measure of all things. In the ontological gap thus opened, other species come galloping in." (Braidotti 2013, p. 67).

The research of Italian biologist Stefano Mancuso is relevant in this posthuman and post-anthropocentric context, as he insists that even though plants are not endowed with a brain, there is no reason to believe that they cannot sense and think (Mancuso 2017, pp. 139–43; Mancuso 2018). "But if plants do not have a heart, does it mean they do not have circulation? If they do not have lungs, do they not breathe? If they have no mouth, do they not feed? And without a stomach, do they not digest?" (Mancuso 2018, p. 140) The biological structures of plants are different from those of animals but that does not mean that they cannot sense or think. Their organs are interwoven, which means for instance, that if one part of a plant is harmed the plant will employ other parts for restoring any damaged functions. Mancuso points out that humans may learn a lot from plants about how to collaborate and overcome challenges. Plants are not to be seen as isolated objects but as a part of a larger context and to emphasize their ability to communicate with each other Mancuso describes their actions as *swarm behavior*.

There are similar notions at play in the best-seller *The Hidden Life of Trees* that became a sensation in Germany in 2015 and has been translated into many languages since.⁶ Here, author Peter Wohlleben addresses, for instance, how trees communicate with one another, distribute nourishment between them and how they stand together as a united whole. In his book, Wohlleben explains how trees prevail over abilities that before were assigned to only humans, or at least only to some animal species. The main conclusion of the book is that the life around us is much deeper than people tend to think and that everything alive is part of the same whole and cannot, nor should be, seen as independent of it. A similar approach is to be found in the best-selling novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, published in 2018 (Powers 2018). These tendencies and ideas on the importance to explore and investigate different elements in the nature from a non-human perspective are to be found in other fields than only natural science, philosophy or literature. In the field of contemporary photography, and for that matter in the visual arts in a broader context, this emphasis on exploring natural phenomena is also very relevant, and here especially trees and all their mystical and fascinating qualities have been the object of observation for artists using photography as their medium. In that context, it is worth mentioning the acclaimed exhibition *Trees* (fr. *Nous les Arbres*) at the Fondation Cartier for Contemporary Art in Paris in 2019.⁷

⁴ On the concept of *episteme*, see (Foucault 1966).

⁵ (Braidotti 2013). See also explanation and reflection on the anthropocene; (Gardiner and Thompson 2017; Williams and Wate 2016; Davis 2016).

⁶ (Wohlleben 2015). See also Peter Wohlleben, <http://www.peter-wohlleben.de/> and an article by (Luster 2016).

⁷ See <http://www.fondationcartier.com/en/exhibitions/nous-les-arbres>.

The Swedish photographer Helene Schmitz has captured trees and plants in many of her works. For her work *The Forest*, she photographed a Swedish forest, seemingly in hibernation.⁸ The trees have shed their leaves and the trunks shoot straight up with groping branches; they are reaching for one another. Instead of hosting a thriving undergrowth of moss and plants the soil is depleted, grey and dead. These photographs are made in Västmanland where a great area of land was engulfed by forest fires in the summer of 2014, large numbers of people and animals were evacuated and one man was killed. Not only do these photographs speak of the forest as such, but they also speak of destruction and of nature's will of life.

Trees are complicated phenomena; not only do they provide humans with shelter in a tough world, but like any natural phenomenon, they also assume unexpected and frightening forms. In a series of photographs of Kudzu trees in the United States, Helene Schmitz illuminates how nature and the forest serve more than just decorative functions in the human world; they are also powerful forces that man may not always manage to contain.⁹

Schmitz's photographs present us with a magical realm. At first, her black and white pictures of groves and thickets seem to be images from an imaginary world; a landscape one only expects to encounter in fiction or in a dream—but in fact, these photographs serve to communicate how the innocent intervention of man in nature can go terribly wrong. In 1876, Japan gave to the United States, in celebration of the latter's centenary, a number of small Kudzu plants. Originally, the Kudzu provoked both interest and admiration because of its fertility and rate of growth but soon enough dismay took over as the plant settled great areas of land in the south-eastern United States, decimating other vegetation in its path. Like the photographs of Schmitz show, this plant reminds us that nature is not only beautiful but also terrifying and unpredictable. Even plants, these lifeforms we tend to underestimate and consider innocent, can threaten other forms of life and demonstrate to us humans how powerless we are in the face of life in all its most complicated forms. In the work of Schmitz, the Kudzu plant becomes in fact a symptom of what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan termed *the real*.

Lacan made a distinction between *reality* and *the real*. The real is existence itself, both existence as perceived by humans and existence as that which *is*, independent of humans. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan described the real as the essential encounter with the world, that is, the encounter which exceeds our learned encounter with the world. Reality, however, is the web of words and symbols that humans apply to engage with, understand and define existence. In order to contain the real, we resort not only to language but just as well to art, imagination or what Lacan called the fantasy.¹⁰ Thus, imagination becomes a certain screen between us and the world but, as Schmitz makes clear in her photographs of the Kudzu plant, art can also be employed to highlight the real—and in turn, somehow cause the fabric of reality to tear open.

4. Flesh of the World

Nature resides both within humans and without them. We are embodied beings. We are of the flesh of the world as the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty would explain it. In his book *The Visible and the Invisible* he writes:

⁸ See <http://fotografiska.eu/en/utställningar/utställning/transitions/> and <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vastmanland/3122632>.

⁹ Helene Schmitz homepage, <http://www.helenschmitz.se/works/kudzu-project>, Sven Olof Wallenstein, "The Kudzu Project", in (Schmitz 2015). See also Fotografisk Center (2017). *Herbarium—Fotografi og Botanik*. Copenhagen: Fotografisk Center and <http://fotografiska.eu/en/utställningar/utställning/transitions/> For further discussion of the destructive element of the Kudzu plant: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/> and <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07352680490505150>.

¹⁰ (Lacan 1998). See also discussion on the difference between the real and the reality in (Zizek 2006).

[...] my body is made of the same flesh as the world [...], and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it [...] they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 248)

Within the liberal arts and contemporary philosophy, there has been an increasing emphasis on seeing the human as an offspring and part of nature; a part of the flesh of the world. This is manifested, for instance, in an increased emphasis on the role of the body in all knowledge production.¹¹ Human thought will no longer be divorced from human perception and human experience of the world.

When my left hand touches my right hand, I am forced to remember that I am both: a perceiving subject and a tactile object (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 9). We are both bodies among bodies but we are also sentient beings who tend to convince themselves that they can surpass their physical or material state. We are of the flesh of the world.

We can talk about thinking as being *embodied* in this context. In the words of philosopher Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir, we are physical beings and the body is the “the place of lived experience of embodiment”.¹²

As flesh, the body is relational; we are born into ties with family and relatives, into a social context, culture, and traditions. As bodies, we are always at a particular age, in a particular situation, of certain abilities, gender, and so on. Recognition of the human being as embodied undermines philosophy’s traditional distinction between mind/soul and body, and between intellect and emotion. The body makes us real [...]. (Þorgeirsdóttir 2015, p. 69)

Knowledge comes into being through our bodies; all experience, also cognitive experience, is embodied experience. By acknowledging the body as an important medium in the creation of knowledge and in understanding the composition of reality, we raise new questions about humanity’s relation to nature and each individual’s embeddedness in the flesh of the world. Sigríður writes:

Embodiment is [...] part of a new, broader understanding of humanity and the humane, as the body connects humans to the earth and all other organisms. As bodies we are interrelated with other human and non-human animals. We are dependent on each other globally as human beings, and as earthlings we are one among many interdependent species. This gives us a deeper understanding of what it means to be “a human being” and “human”, not least in times of rapid technological developments that throw into question, and transform, our ideas about humans and humanity. (Þorgeirsdóttir 2015, pp. 69–70)

This increased recognition of human embodiment, this emphasis on the human being as part of a larger natural whole, is highly political and touches on matters of power and the abuse of power, gender and gender roles, our use of language, ideas about surveillance and panopticism, confinement and freedom, climate change and attitudes toward nature.

Embodied thinking is always molded by the particular personal experience of being an embodied being. As a result, the personal experience of each and everyone is a source for innovative use of art and consequently, a new type of thinking that does away with dualistic thinking, clearing the way for new interpretations and understandings. Thus, the truth about the world is created through a dynamic interplay of subject and object. A further consequence is that science and art are not defined in opposition to one another but are seen as different methods of perceiving and understanding the world. In both cases, the source of knowledge is in the body and in its interplay with everything outside itself.

In the book *To Be Two (Essere Due)* from the year 1994, the French philosopher Luce Irigaray writes about this relationship of man and nature and about how knowledge production and the use

¹¹ See e.g., (Heinämaa 2011).

¹² (Þorgeirsdóttir 2015). Translated by Sarah M. Brownsberger for Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir, “Might you, earth, not remain around me?” in (Bergmann and Hallin 2019).

of language must depend on our experience as embodied beings (Irigaray 1994, 2000). The feminine approach, as opposed to the masculine objective inquiry of traditional science, presupposes a dynamic interplay between subjective consciousness and the object of inquiry. Nature, for instance, does not subject itself silently to the definition of an external researcher. It always responds. It surprises us. It portrays the scientific or artistic inquiry in a new light, it even redefines the position of the scientist or the artist in the very nature under investigation. Nature resides both within and without us. We are of the flesh of the world, but we are also capable of perceiving and understanding that there is some kind of a border between ourselves and the world. We are at the same time within and without.

In this context, it is relevant to look at Hallgerður Hallgrímsdóttir work, *Fissures*, from 2015.¹³ This work is on the rupture that happens to the perception and understanding of reality when experiencing the loss of a child, and the artist's attempt to gain hold of reality after this experience. To lose a child can be described as the most feared trauma a parent can imagine. What characterizes trauma is that the encounter with the real (as explained before with references to the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan) is always and essentially a missed one—an encounter with something that cannot be understood through the signs we normally use to file the real, making it an understandable reality. The encounter with the real is always unforeseen; it always comes as a surprise and conflicts with the pre-established system. Therefore, we experience it as a traumatic gap in our system of signs. Or as the art theorist Margaret Iversen has put it: “[...] the world of representation is given only if the immediacy of the real is sacrificed, and conversely, the real is glimpsed only when the vanity of the world conceived as my representation is renounced.” (Iversen 2009).

Reality itself puts its mark on every photography—and in some photographs, we glimpse the real that lies behind. Or, in the words of Ulrich Baer, “photography can provide special access to experiences that have remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten”. (Baer 2005, p. 7) Trauma, as Baer explains “emerges as something that can bypass experience and yet register, with great force, on an individual's mind and body”. (ibid., p.10) The task one has to face after experiencing trauma is to witness the gap, to go through the process that Sigmund Freud described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the process from *acting out* to *working through*—that is to explain the unexplainable, to turn the lived experience into a conscious and understandable experience, and therefore to accept the unacceptable, the gap itself, the fissures.¹⁴

Some of the photographs in the series *Fissures* are taken the day after she arrived back home from the hospital without the baby she had been expecting. One of the photos is a self-portrait Hallgerður claims she cannot remember taking. The black and white portrait shows her in all her vulnerability but also in her strength. She is staring at the viewer, like she is saying, “I am here and I don't know what to do next or what you want from me”. Another photograph depicts a young man, her husband, standing on a balcony, not looking back, not looking down, not looking at anything, not the view or the horizon, while the structure of the photograph draws our attention to a tool kit in the window-shelf and the curtains that partly hide the man on the balcony. All the photographs in *Fissures* are black and white and apart from those two mentioned above, as well as another one showing her sleeping husband, all are devoid of human beings. The focus is on objects in her environment, a cave full of snow in the lava field, a white high-school building and a pattern of snow in the grass on a winter day, a bed that needs to be made and a cover sheet for catching the blood from a woman who has recently given birth. All these familiar things take on an uncanny appearance as if the photographer is seeing them for the first time, not understanding what to do with them at the same time as she seems to be paying special attention to all the objects that make the world around her physical.

¹³ Hallgerður Hallgrímsdóttir homepage, <http://hallgerdur.com/index.php?/work/fissures--daudhadjupar-sprungur/>.

¹⁴ (Freud 1961). Dominick LaCapra has written an excellent work on the working-through process in relation to the narrative and writing about a traumatic past. See (LaCapra 1999, 2001).

Three years after her loss, Hallgerður published a book, *Gluey days* (Icel. *Límkenndir dagar*) consisting of poems made with words and photographic images. She explains this poetic work in the following words:

Sometimes it seems life just happens. And then a single event changes everything. Time becomes viscous, heavy with loneliness. We are confronted with the fragility of life and our perception of the world shifts to match our state of mind. Unless it is the other way around?

The series attempts to convey this shrouding of the mind through quiet poems, some of which are photographs but others made from words. (Hallgrímsdóttir 2018)

With both photographs and words, Hallgrímsdóttir strives to get hold of her lived experience and emotions which do not fit into a system or discourse and share them with others. Maybe because of her love for you.

5. My Love to You

A photograph is one way to represent our lived experience of the world we are part of, at the same time as it can be seen as an attempt to see the world from an outside viewpoint. “I see only from one point, but in my existence, I am looked at from all sides,” wrote Jacques Lacan (Lacan 1998, p. 72). Even though we share the world with others, even though we are only one particular body among other bodies, each and every *body* is unique. We cannot confidently know how others experience the world, but that is precisely why it is so important to share our experiences and sense of the world with others. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 11) We can never know for sure if others see and sense the world the same way as we do. The beauty I experience when I look at a falling yellow leaf against a blue sky is not exactly the same beauty as you may experience. Do the two of us see the same nuance of colors when we look at the leaf? It is this inevitable interval between my experience and your experience that both nurtures my desire to share and makes sharing impossible. My experience can never be the same as your experience, but it is still this shared desire to have something in common that makes us want to communicate our experiences to others.

This thinking, which I take from Merleau-Ponty, can also be related to what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called *différance* and is the basis of *deconstruction*.¹⁵ The origin of the word *différance* lies in the *a*—which separates it from the French word *différence*. The distinction between *différence* and *différance* is that the latter includes a time factor, a kind of delay, which Derrida has described as the disjuncture of time.¹⁶ By using the concept of *différance* Derrida wanted to stress, not only how everything differs from other things, but also how time, the moment itself can never be fully present. As soon as we try to think about the moment, to get hold of it, it escapes from us. The lived moment becomes a thought about what *was*. A total presence between language and the world does therefore only exist as an idea. *Différance* is the gap between our lived experience of the world and the discourse we use to describe it, it is the gap where new meanings may emerge. *Différance* is the movement that makes it possible for us to criticize our own discourse, or our own consciousness for that matter, and experience the space which occurs when the signifier and the signified do not correspond completely with each other. If this gap did not exist no creativity would be possible. We would be one with the world and therefore unable to interpret our experience of it. In the same way, this gap between our being in the world and our interpretation of our being in the world is what nurtures our desire to share our lived experience, and the meaning we derive from it, with others.¹⁷

Luce Irigaray is one of the philosophers to have written about how the desire to share and to take part in the lives of others is based on the insurmountable interval between two persons. This interval

¹⁵ On the relation between the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida see (Þorsteinnsson 2014).

¹⁶ See e.g., (Derrida 1994a).

¹⁷ See e.g., (Derrida 1994b, 1985, 2002).

is the premise for our ability to relate to and love others. (Irigaray 2000, pp. 27–28) We can only love the other if we respect her or his otherness—the fact that they are other than we are. You but not me. You are not what I want you to be:

You remain you thanks to the you which you are for me, which you are “to” me—to recall the “to” of *I Love to You*, which has nothing to do with possession. [. . .] In my desire for you, in the love that I share with you, my body is animated by the desire to be with you or to you, with me or to me, and it also longs for existence of a between-us. (ibid., pp. 27–28)

She adds:

To leave the other to be, not to possess him in any way, to contemplate him as an irreducible presence, to relish him as an inappropriable good, to see him, to listen to him, to touch him, knowing that what I perceive is not mine. Sensed by me, yet remaining other, never reduced to an object. (ibid., p. 46)

What Irigaray makes clear, resonates with the attitude, reflected in the approach of photographer Joakim Eskildsen, referenced earlier. When Eskildsen photographs people living in a society that is unfamiliar to him, he puts emphasis on being among the people, sharing their world and living in the same conditions, as far as that is possible. He does not wish to approach children living in poor conditions in the USA or Roma people in Russia, like objects he can look at from a safe distance with the eyes of the visitor. He wants to share the experience of life with those he photographs; to smell the same smell, to watch the same grass grow, to see and smell the same garbage, walk barefooted on the same earth. Still, he knows that between him and them there is an unbridgeable gap, but instead of seeing this gap as an obstacle, he sees it as a gap of possibilities. The photographer always stands apart from the subject matter, but that is precisely why he is able to respect his subject matter—to love her or him as the other and say, as Irigaray does, *I love to you* rather than *I love you*.

In photographic studies, one can see how this thinking has had an impact on what has been called the *relational method*. In 2017, the Swedish photographer and theorist, Angelica Harms, wrote an article on the relational method. There she explains:

One can distinguish recent tendencies in photography where those involved refuse to shoulder the roll of the truth-teller and instead are involved in creating encounters and forming communities. Contemporary photography is created by relationships between people. (Harms 2017)

The relational method makes the one who is photographed a participant in the project rather than making her or him an object of the project. This method can easily be adapted to the approach Eskildsen uses in his work. But the relational method, like poetic storytelling, does not only aim at creating mutual understanding and collaboration between the one who photographs and the one who is photographed but also includes the viewer and his role is seeing as part of the whole which gives meaning to the work itself. It is not only that the meaning of the work is created in this play between the viewer, the photographer and the one being photographed, but the knowledge of the existence of each of these collaborators affects the outcome, that is the photograph itself, and the role of each of its participants in it. The consciousness of this interaction can recall complicated feelings and can both create pleasure and discomfort for those involved.

The children darted back and forth around the old bus in the sunshine. I counted seven of them as I walked by, all ruddy-cheeked and noisy, in spite of their shabby clothes. The bus stood not on wheels but on wooden trestles, in a patch of rough grass amidst all the smart holiday homes. Most of its paint had flaked away and the windscreen was cracked. (Eliasson 2005, 2008)

This text by the Icelandic author Gyrðir Eliasson evokes an image that could be part of Joakim Eskildsen’s photographic work of Roma people. From 2000 to 2006, Joakim traveled with his wife,

the poet Cia Rinne, around Europe and India to photograph Roma people, their environment and daily life. Joakim and Cia made an effort to get to know the people whose life was the subject of the project and lived for some time with the Roma people in their closed society, located, for example, in dumps in Greece, in a beautiful old town in South-France, in a gray apartment building in a suburb in Finland but for the longest period in a small town in Hungary.¹⁸

Eskildsen's work is very poetic and sometimes even dreamlike, even when he shows us the life of Roma people, drenched in fear and utter poverty in the dumps and slums of Europe, or wretched and deprived children in the US. Still, it is not because of the misery or the poverty that Eskildsen creates this special aesthetic frame in his works, but because by using this poetic approach, he reflects the beauty that can be found in everyday life in different spots of the world, be it in the society formed by the Roma people in Russia or in his own home in Berlin.¹⁹ The dreamlike atmosphere, created by the soft light and the quietness, does not keep the viewer at a safe distance but draws him into the image, makes him stop for a while and look at the world through the frame of the photograph—no matter if the people depicted in the photographs are mothers and children living in dolorous circumstances in the sunny state of California (published in his book *American Realities*) or his own beloved children.²⁰

As with poetic storytelling, the relational method, aims to activate the possibilities that can be found in the gap that always exists between a photograph and the world it depicts. The *différance* is part of the relational method just as it is part of the poetic storytelling. Angelica Harms, however, does not refer to *différance* in her article but instead focuses on the thing that is *in-between*.²¹ She points out that photographers, who work within the relational method, neither try to describe the world they depict from an objective nor subjective point of view, but that the focus of their work is on the relationship between the object and the subject.

The ideas that the relational method is grounded on, are in many ways similar to poetic storytelling and one could even talk about the relational method as one strand that can be found within poetic storytelling. The importance of the viewer is crucial as he creates a subjective meaning from the photograph. Both facts and fiction, reality and imagination, become part of the meaning created and the truth that is represented by the photograph. The evidence and documentary value of the photographs is to be found in the viewers' conviction that what the photograph depicts really did happen in a certain place at a certain time. The connotation is, however, floating between what the photographer *saw* and what the viewer *sees* when looking at the photograph—and the interpretation is created in this interplay. For documentary photographers, this can be a challenging actuality to face. However, some documentary and even news photographers seem to work with this gap that exists between the world and our interpretation of it in a creative way.²²

One project worth mentioning in this context is the award-winning documentary photo-story by an Icelandic news photographer, Heiða Helgadóttir, on both the material and emotional condition of an asylum seeker, Morteza Zadeh, in Iceland in 2016.²³ Zadeh's story is told with a deep sensitivity without being too emotional. The narrative method Helgadóttir uses is worth attention, as she moves between

¹⁸ (Eskildsen 2009) and <http://www.joakimeskildsen.com/>.

¹⁹ This was, for example, the discussion in a open talk between Hasse Persson and Joakim Eskildsen at Landskrona Museum at *Landskrona Fotofestival*, 10. September 2017.

²⁰ *En verden jeg kan tro på. Joakim Eskildsen*, Copenhagen: Det Nationale Fotomuseum, 22. maj 2015—30. januar 2016. (Eskildsen 2016). See also: (Moroz 2016).

²¹ Angelica Harms, "Photography—a relational drama".

²² Here I can name the work of Swedish Photographer, Magnus Wennman, and his series, *Where Children Sleep*, from 2015. The Project, which is a collaboration between Wennman, UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), *Aftonbladet* in Sweden and Fotografiska—The Swedish Museum of Photography, features photographs of refugee children asleep in locations around the Middle East and Europe. See information about the project and exhibition at UNHCR website, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2016/3/56fbd034>, *Aftonbladet* website, <https://darbarnensover.aftonbladet.se/> and Fotografiska website, <https://www.fotografiska.com/sto/utstallningar/magnus-wennman-dar-barnen-sover/>.

²³ The photo-story was first published in the newspaper *Stundin*, 9. October 2016: <https://stundin.is/frett/daglegt-lif-daudadaemds-manns/> See also Press Photos of the year 2016: <https://issuu.com/bladamannafelagislands/docs/myndir-arsins-2016>.

public spaces where she photographs Zadeh from a distance and personal space where she shows Zadeh's everyday life and the emotional state he goes through in a delicate focus. The photographs mediate both warmth and understanding without being too emotional and Helgadóttir uses the light in a systematic way to stress the sensitive circumstances Zadeh is stuck in. The poetic atmosphere of the photographs mediates a soft calmness around Zadeh even though he is going through an extremely dramatic period in his life, waiting to be deported as his application for refugee status has just been declined. In one of the photographs, one can see Zadeh walk beside the Japanese priest Toshiki Toma in an Icelandic church. This was the photograph of the year 2016, awarded by the Press-Photographers' Association in Iceland.

The photographer is situated among other guests at the church but grabs the moment and with the photograph also awakes questions about the status of press photographers today and their responsibility. The photographer finds herself in a safe distance but still, her presence in the photograph is obvious as the photograph underlines her perspective. The photograph represents intimacy, caution and respect for the people involved. The structure of the photograph and the use of light draws the focus of the viewer to the friendship between those two different men, standing side by side, praying to God. In that way, the photograph does not only inform us about the situation of refugees in Iceland but also mediates on the friendship and solidarity you see between those two men who find themselves in Iceland for totally different reasons. At the same time, you can say that the photograph reflects on the status of us, the viewers, and the role of those who witness a decisive moment in other people's lives; a moment, which not only reflects an emotional change in the life of a certain person but also casts its light on society in a broader perspective.

The way Helgadóttir is approaching the world through her photographs is not so different from the method Eskildsen uses in his art photographic projects. One can even argue that the relational method is a method that moves or blurs the boundaries that have been defined between documentary photography and art photography.

6. Resonance in an Uncanny World

I reached the fence surrounding the preserve. It had barbed wire on it, and the gate was made of iron with a heavy bolt, painted green in the spirit of the trees. I lifted the latch with my staff, pulled the gate open, and went in. I closed it behind me, to keep the horses out, which were all around in the surrounding fields.

I was alone there, in among the trees. I no longer felt the cold, but simply enjoyed the walking, even though I was slow and limping with the cane. I thought about calling my wife at the clinic where she worked and telling her I had gone on a hike, but decided not to. She probably wouldn't have cared anyway. (Eliasson 2009)

This text by Icelandic author Gyrðir Eliasson, from his short story collection *Between the Trees* (2009) describes the silent observer who both registers what is inside and what is outside; he contemplates the environment, turns every stone, notices patterns and reflects on his own existence and meaning of life. Everyday moments become worthwhile.

After reading the book, it is hard to get away from the images it has evoked; strong images of normal people in everyday circumstances. In his stories, Eliasson shows how the spirit of a certain time can be preserved in one glance, one sentence, or one moment. In the story *Vanished Summer* from 2009, the main character's feelings and the atmosphere of his circumstances are crystallized in a few sentences that describe a moment from an uneventful life. The storyteller's observations of his environment turn the lived moment into memory as soon as it happens. The focus is on subjective observation of natural elements and human behavior. Even though Eliasson's novels and short stories take place in the 21st century, he does not write about the acceleration of modernity, social media, technical revolutions or the dark future of humankind, instead, it is this observation of and relationship

to natural elements and time.²⁴ Elíasson was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize for his book *Between the Trees*. The book was written while Elíasson lived in a small town in South-Iceland called Hveragerði.²⁵

Hveragerði is a strange town by the main highway in Iceland. There, one finds hot mud pools, some greenhouses in disrepair, but others in full business attracting a lot of visitors from Reykjavík. There is a sanatorium in town, an art museum, a bakery, neglected gardens and gardens well cared for, yet few people can ever be seen walking the streets. Notable Icelandic writers (Guðrún Eva Mínervudóttir and Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir as well as Elíasson) have plotted for stories to take place in this town, and the same could be said of photographer Katrín Elvarsdóttir.

In 2010, Elvarsdóttir exhibited a series of photographs titled *Nowhereland* at the Reykjavík Art Museum.²⁶ The exhibition was the outcome of her dwelling in an artist residence in Hveragerði the previous year. The art critic Jón B. K. Ransu wrote in his critic for the newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, that Elvarsdóttir showed that she had a very sensitive view on dramatic moments of uncertainty—even though most of the photographs depicted eventless moments and places (Ransu 2010). Ransu reflects on the special atmosphere captured in Elvarsdóttir's photographs. One can sense the silence of this small town, and the warm damp from the earth smelting into the drizzle, curtains moving almost unnoticeably when someone walks by, and the uncanniness of the caravans at the outskirts of town. It is fascinating to look at how the atmosphere in both Elvarsdóttir's and Elíasson's work echoes one another. Elvarsdóttir's photographs and Elíasson's texts emerge from the same environment. The photographs are shaped by the reality and the environment they are depicting but still, Elvarsdóttir emphasizes that her photographs should not be seen as a part of a certain location or place. She is not documenting the environment or the society of Hveragerði. Elvarsdóttir's photographs show us a fictional world, nourished by the reality she experienced when walking back and forth in Hveragerði and its surroundings. Elvarsdóttir states that she first started to read Elíasson's work a few years after the exhibition *Nowhereland*, but then was very inspired by his writings and felt a strong connection. A few years later, when photographing a series depicting caravans in the south of Iceland, Elíasson's work was like an accompaniment for her. (Elvarsdóttir 2017)

The photograph as a medium can fuse the boundaries between reality and fiction, or for that matter, the boundaries between the objective world and the creative and subjective artist. The photographer often has the intention of grasping hold of reality in his own personal and subjective way, but it is likely that he will fail in doing so unless he shows the world he wants to depict a certain kind of respect and submissiveness. It is an interactive relationship.

One can state that a good photographer does not only see what he expects to see but is willing to enter a dialogue with reality itself. It is like he is opening up for resonance with reality or what the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa has described as being open to the world, wanting to be affected and wanting to respond or answer. (Rosa 2019, 2020; Lijster and Celikates 2019, p. 72) When in resonance with the world, one experiences "this other" which transforms her or him. (Lijster and Celikates 2019, p. 74) According to Rosa: "Art should insist on the transformative element of resonance." He explains: "[...] art is one sphere where we can explore different ways of being in the world and of relation to the world and I think really this is what art is about." (ibid., p. 68) A photograph as a medium of art makes a space for the artist to meet the reality in both a realistic and dreamlike way, to affect and to be affected, to transform and be transformed.

²⁴ This is reflected in a speech Elíasson gave at the ceremony when he was awarded The Nordic Council Literature Prize in Copenhagen in 2011. See: *Vísir*, 4. November 2011, <http://www.visir.is/g/2011711049921>.

²⁵ *Morgunblaðið*, 13. April 2013, <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1374597/>.

²⁶ Reykjavík Art Museum homepage, <https://artmuseum.is/exhibitions/d16-katrin-elvarsdottir> Elvarsdóttir's exhibition *Nowhereland* was part of a larger project, carried out in the period between 2007 and 2013, under the titles *Vanished Summer* and *Equivocal*. See Katrín Elvarsdóttir's homepage, <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/project/vanished-summer/> and <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/project/equivocal/>.

Elvarsdóttir's exhibition *Nowhereland* was part of a larger project, carried out in the period between 2007 and 2013, featured in two of her photographic monographs; *Equivocal* from 2011 and *Vanished Summer* from 2013.²⁷ Most of the photographs from those series show a deserted environment. In a few images though, one can see the back of a person or even a person looking with empty eyes straight into the camera lens. The photographs are staged, and the characters look like actors on the stage of reality. Elvarsdóttir photographs empty mobile homes, a kitchen sink and a path twisting around trees in a small village. In *Equivocal* one can see frilly curtains, the inside of an old and empty train and stairs leading to a mysterious basement. Even though the photographs radiate warmth, one can sense some kind of danger lurking underneath. There is something eerie in the calmness of the photographs, like the moment, seemingly frozen in time, and which we cling to, before the disaster strikes; the world holds its breath and waits for the unexpected to happen, or as the art critic Lucas Gehrmann puts it, "All these contribute to an imaginary world of situations we might already have sensed in Alfred Hitchcock, Edward Hooper or the house of our grandmother." (Gehrmann 2017, pp. 26–37).

Katrín Elvarsdóttir employs the photograph to create an imagined world arising from reality itself, highlighting the unfamiliar of environments usually considered dull. The unexpected and the strange are lurking. The borders between imagination and reality, between dream and waking hour, are not always sharply defined. In her works, time passes as in a dream. The theatre of the past merges with the present and the familiar takes on an uncanny hue.

Nature plays a large role in Elvarsdóttir's photographs and more often than not the man-made and the natural conflict with, or complement, one another. In various works, one can see how Elvarsdóttir repeatedly highlights how nature infiltrates man-made environments—such as ruin and breaking curb walks—while humans transform nature, inhabiting it by parking a trailer off the road or digging a pond in a barren moor. In an interview with Kenta Murakami, Elvarsdóttir explains: "The interplay between the natural and the man-made interest me tremendously, and I'm fascinated by the methods that people use in trying to improve upon nature. Sometimes I stumble upon expressions of the absurdity of it; sometimes it's the beauty that captures me."²⁸

Nature and the human need to retain or introduce the natural world in an unnatural, human-made environment is an important subject in Elvarsdóttir's series *Double Happiness* from the year 2016, featuring photographs made in China during a period of four years.²⁹ With the project, Elvarsdóttir creates stories that compel the audience to enter and participate in creating, in order to make sense of what is taking place. With the photographic medium, she investigates people's posture, their attire and their facial gestures. Next to the photographs of elderly people, Elvarsdóttir places studies of objects that stand out and feel like staged props but in fact, they structure the environment of real people. Stacks of bricks, sandbags, chairs, paper boxes, plastic bottles and vines climbing a wire gate. It may be that the characters themselves, an old lady leaning on an iron railing and another one supported by a walking stick, are not conscious of how the things in their environment shed light on their lives, provided an audience with notions to process. In the photographs, these things that are both familiar and strange at the same time become the subject matter for a story the viewer is allowed to fabricate. It does not need to be a true story; it is first and foremost imagined by the viewer but still, reality is what nourishes it. It is reality itself that yields the subject matter. A woman in a purple dress, a red bottle on a green table and a few broken eggs in a carton. The world that Katrín Elvarsdóttir

²⁷ Katrín Elvarsdóttir, <http://katrinelvarsdottir.com/> (Elvarsdóttir 2012) and (Elvarsdóttir 2013). See also an article on *Vanished Summer* and *Equivocal* (Gehrmann 2017, p. 35).

²⁸ Interview with Kenta Murakami in *Anti-Grand: Contemporary Perspectives on Landscape*. The Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, University of Richmond, VA, 2015. Cited from Lucas Gehrmann, "Katrín Elvarsdóttir's Photo-Visions as Alloys of Reality, Light and Fiction," p. 35.

²⁹ (Elvarsdóttir 2016). See also Katrín Elvarsdóttir homepage, <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/project/double-happiness/> and <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/double-happiness/>.

creates is both real and imagined—just like the reality of most of us. We need imagination in order to make sense of reality.

With *Double happiness*, Elvarsdóttir demonstrates the need people have for nature, a need that possibly arises precisely because humans have become so estranged from the natural world in their everyday environments. As she was making those photographs of daily life in Chinese megacities, she noticed how nature would constantly infiltrate the frame, either as wild plants and planted vegetation or as imitations; a pattern of flowers on a worn-out mattress, a painted landscape on kitchen tiles or photographs of tree branches glued to a windowpane.

I look at a photograph, showing a green plant crawling down what at first sight seems to be a window frame but after a closer look and a discussion with the artist, it turns out to be a faded poster showing *an industrial city*, hung on a wall in an industrial city. It does not fully satisfy the owner to glance out the window to see the big gray city, there is also this photograph on the wall, showing the same things that might be found outside of the window: factory chimneys, high-rises and a mist of pollution. A strong plant crawls down the picture, persistently fighting death just like life itself. In this way, that photograph addresses the human need for nature in a world of human intervention, destruction and transformation.

7. Poetically Woman Dwells

My daughter was born when the chestnuts were blooming. I was lying in a bed in a white hospital room, looking out of the window, watching the small changes on the chestnuts from day to day. The time of plants is different from human time. In the world of plants, things happen slowly most of the time, compared to human measurements. A flower stretches its stem towards the sun and blossoms in a very slow and delicate manner. Stefano Mancuso claims that our lack of understanding of the rich life of plants can partly be explained by how difficult it is for us to understand the concept of time in the context of plants (Mancuso 2017). Time is relative and so is our movement through every given space. The movement which almost is unnoticeable for the human consciousness can be determinant for species that experience the concept of time in a different way than we do. The timeframe for the chestnuts along Tagensvej in Copenhagen is different from mine, and not formed by counting hours, days, months, a human lifetime.

The human time frame is on one hand formed by the system we have invented to analyze time as part of a chronological system (measured against natural elements), and on the other hand, the lived time or our inner time. The French philosopher Henri Bergson used the concepts *temps* and *durée* to describe the measurable chronological time on the one hand and the lived time on the other.³⁰ He explains that there is always some interplay going on between *temps* and *durée* as the measurable time affects how we experience the lived time. Every minute seems like an eternity when we are waiting impatiently for something to take place, and in other moments time flies by. In both cases, we experience a disjuncture between the outer and inner time. It sometimes occurs that we are totally free from the burden of chronological time and coalesce with the time we live (*durée*), and at such moments we can experience that we are intrinsically a part of a larger whole or context, be it the environment, our companions or the nature surrounding us. It is at such moments that our experience and relation to reality becomes deeper and more poetic. The ability to experience time in a poetic way is bound to our ability to dwell creatively in our environment, in resonance with the world. It is at such moments when we are aware of how our existence is a part of a larger whole, that we use our imagination to get a meaningful experience and understanding of the world, like a poet sensing its delicate existence in the world.

³⁰ Bergson wrote about this in *L'Évolution créatrice*, first published in 1907. Walter Benjamin reflected on this in his brilliant article, "On some motifs in Baudelaire".

“Poetically Man Dwells” is a quotation from the German Poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In his poem *In Lieblicher Bläue* Hölderlin writes: “Well deserving, yet poetically Man dwells on this earth” (Germ. “Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde”) and the poem closes with the following line: “Life is death, and death is also life.” (Germ. “Leben is Tod, und Tod is auch ein Leben.”).³¹ In this poem, Hölderlin connects human dwelling on Earth with the starry night and our incapacity to measure what really matters in the world. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger would later use this reference to Hölderlin’s poem as a title to his famous article on being in the world, *Poetically Man Dwells* (Heidegger 1971).

To give oneself completely to living in accordance with your inner time demands that you can both sense yourself and your environment as part of one whole—and use the imagination to give a meaning to this experience of time. This is when our dwelling becomes both creative and poetic. I, therefore, use the term *to dwell poetically* to describe the mode of being, when we slow down from our daily round, breathe in coherence with our environment, and work through our lived experience in a sincere and creative way. At such moments we are in resonance with the world and here I would like to stress, with reference to Hartmut Rosa, that to be in resonance with the world is not the same as to be in total harmony or total consonance, but to be connected, speaking, listening and responding to the world. “Resonance is tied to an openness, of wanting to be affected and answering” (Lijster and Celikates 2019, p. 72) as Rosa puts it, and adds that even though resonance is always emotional and embodied it is not dissolved from the cognitive element, which I would like to add is also necessary for our poetic or creative dwelling. (ibid., p. 76)

Such a way of being or dwelling in the world is something that comes to mind when looking at the works of Danish photographer Astrid Kruse Jensen. After working with the boundaries between the real and the imaginary in her work for many years, Astrid Kruse Jensen’s imagery has turned towards photographs of humans in a brightly lighted and artificial world, drawn out of the real world, and dreamlike photographs of people surrounded by nature which at the same time seems both frightening and attractive.³²

The forest is a recurrent theme in Astrid Kruse Jensen’s art. “The forest is a place where you can get lost—in the beauty of it and in all that we are not in control of. Even though we can cut a tree down, the forest also possesses a wild vehemence which reminds us that we can never control nature completely,” she explained in an interview in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* (Kæjr 2017). The forest is not only beautiful and invigorating but also full of life, both visible and hidden to the human eye, and it can in flash transform itself from a friendly environment into an unpredictable and terrifying force³³ and that is maybe one of the reasons that make it so attractive to the human being, as Kruse Jensen points out.

For some years, Astrid Kruse Jensen’s studio was located in an old house, deep in the Danish forest. There she went every morning after sending her children to school in a town close by. “Here in the forest, I can experience my smallness. Be humble,” she says and talks about how it is to share her being with the trees, to be surrounded by trees, listening to the wind in the leaves and feel like an intrinsic part of nature (Kæjr 2017). In her mind, the forest is a shelter for the provocation and acceleration of our times, a place where she can feel her perception in coherence with her senses and the environment. In the 21st century, the powers of acceleration may no longer be experienced as a liberating force, but as

³¹ The reference to Hölderlin’s poem can be found here: Bibliotheca Augustana: https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/19Jh/Hoelderlin/ho_0801.html. The English translation I use is from (Hölderlin 1984).

³² See Astrid Kruse Jensen homepage, <http://www.astridkrusejensen.com/>.

³³ This perspective on the forest is especially clear in Kruse Jensen’s series, *Fragments of Remembrance*, Disappearing into the Past and Within the landscape, see http://www.astridkrusejensen.com/works/index.php?Fragments_of_Remembrance_image=4, http://www.astridkrusejensen.com/works/index.php?Disappearing_into_the_past_image=0, and http://www.astridkrusejensen.com/works/index.php?Within_the_Landscape_image=0. See further Kruse Jensen’s exhibition *Floating* in Martin Asbæk Gallery in Copenhagen, 26 April—1 June 2019, <https://martinasbaek.com/exhibitions/astrid-kruse-jensen/>.

an actually enslaving pressure, and in that situation, nature may be seen as an escape.³⁴ The forest is a place where Kruse Jensen can go to experience a more sensible and maybe more human pace of time than in the city. In that respect, her work also reflects this need, common to people today, to seek shelter in nature, to reinvent their relationship with nature, respect it and to some degree be one with it. “I think about this as some kind of poetic fault,” says Kruse Jensen and points out how this poetic fault, this imperfect merging, is something that is always at work in her artistic work (ibid.). This can both be related to what Hartmut Rosa called resonance and Jacques Derrida analyzed as *différance* as explained before.

Astrid Kruse Jensen’s photographs reflect her thoughts on nature and her wish to share her being with nature, to be both inside and outside at the same time, in some kind of *in-between*, which makes it possible for her to add meaning to the world, to be creative and dwell poetically in the world. Kruse Jensen describes her own work as a poetic offset of reality and adds that it should encourage the viewer to see the familiar from a new perspective (Kæjr 2017).

8. The Future of the/Our Child

Rising alongside the dark visions of the future is empathy, the deeper understanding of the feelings of others. My artistic practice focuses on love, empathy and the relationship between the human and the non-human. [...] My work is based on the notion that empathy can be a way to make the imaginary border between humans and nature dissolve. (Andrews et al. 2020)

This is how the Finnish artist Hertta Kiiski explains her work to Andrews (2020), curator of the exhibition *Silent Spring*, exhibited at Hafnarborg—Centre of Culture and Fine Art, at the Iceland Photo Festival in January 2020. Apart from Kiiski, the Icelandic artists Katrín Elvarsdóttir and Lilja Birgisdóttir (b. 1983) participated in the exhibition. Preparing for the exhibition the three artists worked in collaboration, discussing the themes of the climate crisis, “eco-anxiety” and the status of the human being in times of increasing global warming.³⁵

Climate anxiety and the guilt they feel for the children of the future is the driving force in the artists’ projects—even though they are not going to let the darkness fully into their work. At the exhibition, there was a strong sense of hope even though a dark vision for the future was lurking behind. The hope, one could sense, is not the least marked by the involvement of future generations and how the child, who is going to inherit all the problems involved in the climate crisis, reaches out to nature with respect and tenderness, but still with a certain kind of sincerity, joy and seriousness of a child at play. Elvarsdóttir’s photographs of children’s arms caressing the nature in a delicate way, both in the work *Without a trace* from 2007 and *There is no Planet B* from 2019 are good examples of this.³⁶ So is Hertta Kiiski’s video work, *Pai’s funeral*, where one can see her daughter and her niece play a leading role as they bring the remains of a dead goldfish into the sea where its urn merges with the sea.³⁷ *Melankolia 2047* is another work by Kiiski worth mentioning in this context.³⁸ This work is about the end of the world as we know it, with clear reference to Lars von Trier’s apocalypse film *Melancholia* from 2011. Kiiski’s daughter and niece also play the main roles in this installation where both plants and sponges decorate the scene for the apocalypse together with a big photograph of colorful planet approaching the earth. “There is a perfect lunar eclipse in July 2047. That is also the moment, when the old normal is gone—heat records are routinely shattered. The Earth passes climate departure in 2047—then we have to say goodbye to the climate we know,” explains Kiiski and adds:

³⁴ On acceleration as an enslaving force see e.g., (Rosa 2020).

³⁵ Author’s conversation with Katrín Elvarsdóttir and Hertta Kiiski, 19 January 2020.

³⁶ Katrín Elvarsdóttir’s homepage, <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/project/without-a-trace/> and <https://katrinelvarsdottir.com/project/silent-spring/>.

³⁷ Hertta Kiiski’s homepage, <https://www.herttakiiski.com/newpage>.

³⁸ Hertta Kiiski’s homepage, <https://www.herttakiiski.com/melankolia2047>.

“In July 2017 I’m building a shelter which does not shelter on a float that does not float. The girls featured on a video are in 2047 the same age as I am now.”³⁹

Walter Benjamin wrote an extraordinary and beautiful text about the child and the aura of childhood, published in 1950 (a few years after his death) in the book *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. (Benjamin 2000) In his texts about childhood, Benjamin does not only try to preserve valuable moments from the everyday life of his own childhood but manages to grasp the core of what it means to be a child. He is, in other words, close to grasping the *aura* of childhood.⁴⁰ The aura of childhood describes the child’s special mode of *being in the world*, how the child sees and understands the world. A young child, who has not mastered the cultural understanding which forms our perspective of the world through the discourse and our social habits, is able to sense and resonate with the world in a different way than a teenager or an adult. The child approaches the world in its own way, the child has its own ideas about the end of the world, and the importance of different kinds of species or places. In a child’s mind, one piece of stone can be more valuable than a diamond ring and an evening by the local shore in the dusk and the Nordic wind can be dearer and more rewarding than a dinner at a luxury restaurant in an exotic place. Of course, this can also be the case for an older person who is habitual to the social norms and values—but his or her reflections on the experience will unavoidably take account of the discourse and social norms. Perhaps it is more normal for a young child to dwell poetically in resonance with the world. Perhaps it is a way of being in the world that we need to revive. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the child is a recurrent theme in the works of many photographers working in line with poetic storytelling.⁴¹

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³⁹ Text on Hertta Kiiski’s webpage, <https://www.herttakiiski.com/melankolia2047>.

⁴⁰ See e.g., the definition of aura in Benjamin’s article: (Benjamin 1999c).

⁴¹ A photo series by Astrid Kruse Jensen from 2020, *The World will Never Be the Same*, from the Group exhibition “In Search Of A Future To Come” in Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm in September 3—October 17, 2020, is worth mentioning in this respect, see <https://www.wetterlinggallery.com/exhibitions/wg-105?view=slider#14> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE6up0BpDP2/>.

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