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# **A Rural Society: Jøa**

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## **A Rural Society: Jøa**

### **Introduction**

This text aims to introduce my final project submission for Master of Fine Arts at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Arts, and give insight to the process leading up to the graduation exhibition at Gråmølna in May 2016.

The focus of my project has been urbanisation and depopulation in Norway. This country is well-known for having people settled in every nook and cranny, but today more than 80% of us live in urban settlements (Hartvedt, 2015). Through my project I wanted to investigate how it feels to be a part of the 20% living in the outskirts of Norway, the ones who 'stay behind' and keep living and working in rural Norway. I chose an island in Nord-Trøndelag called Jøa. There are 500 inhabitants on this island, and it is situated 680 meters from the mainland. I went with an experiential methodology - by spending time there, and getting to know people. I wanted to explore how locality plays into our identity. Through sharing individual stories I learned through my research I also want to highlight a more general development that endangers many small communities in Norway.

The final result consists of a series of photographs, depicting both scenes and people, and a sound piece, consisting of three interviews and a four-hour long film showing the trip between the island and the mainland.

### **Methodology and experiments**

My methodology is largely based on experience. During my trips to Jøa, and discussions around the purpose of my visits, I have made some changes to the way I work, like bringing a sound recorder with me and converting some of my conversations into interviews. I took what could be referred to as an 'aimless wandering' approach and let things take their own course - by mainly spending a lot of time just talking to people, trying to get a feel for the place and its communal identity. During this process some contradictions arose - such as my assumed goal as an artist who needs to pursue their chosen medium - for instance; it was difficult to introduce myself as a photographer and then spend most of the time not capturing images, but instead just talking and listening, capturing stories. This however did not seem to be a problem for the locals - as most of the people I met with and talked to seemed both interested in telling their story, and also eager to hear about my project and my background.

It has often been the case that when I talk to new people I am more interested in hearing their story rather than figuring out how it can work in my project, which leads to a lot of undocumented meetings and conversations. These meetings may not be a visible part of the final visualisation of my research but they are an important part of the underlying process that has led me to where I am artistically today.

### **Contextualizing my practice within the current field of art**

In his landscape series 'Lick Creek Line', Ron Jude manages to connect the form in his photography to the larger issues he's depicting, resulting in "a resonant interplay between form and content" (Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2013) leaving strong impressions with the viewers of his work. While editing my work form has been an important tool, I have deliberately steered away from the more 'journalistic approach' and grouped the images with formative similarities together instead of using narrative as a link. I hope this gives a different perspective to the work, and also makes the viewer look longer to grasp the 'story' behind the images.

Although I do consider my work as a part of the *social documentary* genre it is not as saturated with information as a lot of documentary photography. I strongly identify with the genre aesthetic journalism, and my work lies somewhere between the documentary approach and a more aesthetic, artistic style of photography. In his book with the same title Cramerotti describes Aesthetic journalism as "artistic practices in the form of investigation of social, cultural or political circumstances. Its research outcomes takes shape in the art context, rather than through media channels" (2009, p.21). This is a description that fits my project very well.

In aesthetic journalism the artist negotiates what is supposed to be represented directly to the viewer, and does not rely on the overview - this already being provided by traditional journalism. What is accessible for the viewer is not a general image of the world, but rather the specific, conscious position of the author regarding the subject matter, and its relation to the viewer. We, as audience, are invited to think, make connections and solve enigmas represented in the artwork for ourselves, instead of relying on the author to explain. (Cramerotti, 2009, pp. 75-76)

It is always my intention, in all my work, to leave a space of reflection for the viewer: an opening for them to consider the story and to raise questions. The story about depopulation has been told many times before, and questions have been asked, although not all of them answered. My initial aim with this project was to use time as a tool to show a different perspective. By focusing on the staunch people who defy the trends and maintain the rural settlements I hoped to contribute to the discussion around rural politics. Along the way my research has also touched upon identity and place, but also some more unarticulated questions. As Paul Graham says in an interview with Gillian Wearing: "Art is not about providing answers, is it? It's more about questions - asking thought-provoking, unexpected, unarticulated questions" (Wilson et al., 1996).

### **Anthropological approach**

My first semester at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art was mainly spent reading about social anthropology and trying to gain an understanding of how other artists and researchers approach this kind of project. After reading about different anthropological approaches, I began exploring what I could do to avoid being mistaken for a 'tourist' or an outsider who was there to 'register' their exotic lifestyle (Frykman et al., 1994). Therefore my decision to take part in everyday life as much as possible and share my own story, just as the inhabitants share theirs, was relevant to my project's integrity. My aim to a space where both myself and others who were willing could freely exchange experiences lead to a good relationship with my hosts and the people I have met. And I am still often surprised by how easy it is to talk to complete strangers on the island.

I grew up in two different cities in Norway; Alta and Oslo. But I have a very strong connection with the village my mother is from - having been there every summer as long as I can remember and increasing the visits when I was old enough to travel on my own. This village only has 150 inhabitants and is in danger of losing both the school and the local shop in the near future, which usually means losing most of the inhabitants as well. Being involved with this place has therefore led to a strong interest for rural politics and the future of rural Norway. Stories from this place and my personal encounters with other places like it, as well as a general discussion around where we feel 'at home,' has been a basis for the relationships I have developed on the island.

Before pursuing my first fieldtrip I was unsure of what to expect, but I was prepared that this would be a small society largely built around agriculture. The general preconception of the rural areas in Norway is that they have been, and still are, largely linked to agriculture, and although the numbers of farmers has drastically reduced over the last decades this stereotype has not

changed (Almås, 2008, p. 80). Bearing this in mind, I wanted to portray a different aspect of the community. I therefore strived to take part in different social gatherings whenever possible, and visit people in different settings. I also aimed to understand the rural as a critical comment to the urban (Halfacree, 2004, as quoted in Ekmann, 2010). Maybe this way of living is a better alternative than cramming together in the cities? But with large farms and a great deal of cultivated land, I could not avoid this part of the island. My general understanding and impression is that agricultural history is still an important part of their identity, and that it might be easier to try to understand the rural villages in light of their past rather than in comparison with the urban.



Figure 1

### **Identity and Recognition**

One of the themes I have been interested in throughout my research period is the connection between identity and place - how does the place you live in play out on your identity? "Locality describes the fact that our ways of life and experiences of being human are not universal, eternal and ubiquitous, but mortal, temporal and particular" (Vadén and Hannula, 2003, p. 23). 'Being human' is, in other words, not the same experience when you live on Jøa as if you where to live anywhere else: your surroundings shape you, and we are more or less aware of this. To investigate everything that separates a person from Jøa from a person from Namsos, Trondheim or Shanghai, I would have to do a lot more research, and maybe even acquire a degree in

anthropology. But I believe I have managed to point out some of the differences in my work, while still letting the viewer find certain similarities. You do not have to be a captain on a ferry to recognize the gaze into 'nothingness' (*Figure 1*). Whether the viewer reads longing, contemplation or something else into this gaze, these are feelings anyone, from anywhere, has experienced and can identify with.

Both my photographic work and the sound recordings are an attempt to frame someone else's life and thoughts. But it is developed through my own viewpoint, and even though I have extensively tried to let my subjects have the main role, my presence is still visible. In *Figure 2*, for example, I show mundane objects on a table, a coffee cup and mug, some newspapers and a couple of remote controls, hinting towards a television on the wall in the background. It is not completely clear where this is, but the style of the cup, the office-like furniture and objects in the background lead towards a work place, and when this photograph is hanging alongside other photos from the ferry, the viewer might assume that this is also taken on the boat. But the angle of the photograph is not one of an outsider, looking in and observing a typical break room, it is taken from where the worker sits and drinks his coffee and reads the paper, or watches the endless entertainment on the television. In fact, this is how I spent a substantial part of the eighteen hour long stay I had on the ferry in April, and this image is an indication of how I have not only documented the life on the island, but I have also taken part in everyday activities, such as mending walls, buying groceries, and having coffee breaks.





Figure 2

Cramerotti states that we can always present a truthful perspective, but it does not actually exist, because the representation is always seen through the current cultural system (2009, p. 108). The viewer is thereby seeing 'my' reality through the filter of the prevailing cultural system, and the work becomes a result of a collaboration between my documentation and their interpretation within the intellectual space of the gallery.

### **Shaped by politics**

*It is important to understand that "where we come from" is not only a physical place and time. It is a much wider question, linked to all of the thoughts, ideas, fears and wishes that we carry, that we pass on - often both consciously and unconsciously (Vadén and Hannula, 2003, p. 85).*

I believe that the inhabitants at Jøa are strongly affected by where they live in a physical sense, but also by where they live in a political sense. The commercial politics of today are telling them that they are not to be prioritized, that they would be better off living in the city and maybe just keeping their childhood homes as summer houses so they can have a 'break' now and then.

There is of course a political angle to my project, which is implicit in the images. An example of this is *Figure 3*, depicting an empty stall in a cowshed. It is obvious for the viewer that this place has been in use: it is worn down and stained by dirt all the way up to the ceiling. The layers of old, seemingly untouched, dirt and the cobweb in between the fence posts might make you wonder how long it has been since any animals were in there. Is this one of those many farms that have been shut down? I chose this particular image because of this ambiguity. I had others in the series that were more aesthetically pleasing and showed a whole row of empty stalls, making it clear that the cowsheds had not been in use for some time and that they had been left untouched since the day the animals were sold off. By choosing *Figure 3* for the exhibition, I believe I am opening up the potential for more thoughts and questions around the subject, and hopefully more curiosity from the viewer as I leave them to figure it out for themselves.



*Figure 3*

### **Ferry**

The ferry '*Geisnes*' became an unexpectedly large part of my project. I was first intrigued by it when I learnt that it spends most of the time just waiting. It runs one trip per hour (apart from rush hour when it takes two trips per hour), which means that it usually spends 45 minutes each hour just waiting for the next round. There are always four people in the crew on the boat. I wanted to find out what they do with all that 'dead' time, so I asked to spend a day there to make

a film and stayed on the ferry from the first trip, at 6 am, to the last one, at midnight. During this time I had one camera on a tripod in the wheelhouse, taking stills every 20 seconds while using another camera to document around the ship. The pictures from the wheelhouse were put together in a short stop-motion film that is only 2 minutes and 40 seconds long. I shared this at the progress review in spring 2015. I was not quite satisfied with how it turned out, and after having a tutorial with Line Løkken, we agreed that it would look a lot better if I slowed it down, as my aim was to show the steady repetitiveness of the ferry. She also suggested that the film would benefit from a voice over with the conversations I had with people on the island. After showing the 'new' film, now 40 minutes long and with a voice over, at Open Academy and at the progress review in fall 2015, I decided to do it all over in February. This time with a film in real time, not stills. I also decided to separate the sound from the film, and make them to independent but coexisting pieces. At the trip in February 2016 I filmed a sequence lasting 8 hours and 29 minutes, and I decided to edit it down to four hours - both because this is the regular opening time at Grāmølna, and because these four hours contain the change from daylight to darkness.

### Ferry and the Light

Light is not only the most general natural phenomenon, but also the least constant.

Light conditions change from morning to evening and during the night darkness fills the world, as light does during the day. Light, thus, is intimately connected with the temporal rhythms of nature which forms a fifth dimension of understanding. The phenomenon which distinguishes a natural place cannot be separated from these rhythms (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 32).

Norway is well known for its distinctive light conditions, with total darkness in the wintertime and midnight sun in the summertime above the Arctic Circle. Jøa is situated just South of the Arctic Circle, and the changes in the different seasons are very visible. It is definitively a big part of the *genius loci* ("spirit of the place"), and it is something that without a doubt affects people living with these conditions.

The change in daylight is thus a distinct part of the film piece; it is how you notice that time has passed, and maybe even what time of the year it was recorded. The repetition of the short trip and the long hauls of waiting introduce the viewer to the everyday life at the dock, the commute for some of the islanders, and the routine of the workers on the ferry. It reminds us of a different

speed of life, a rhythm more commonly associated with rural life. The ferry is in some ways the island's pulse or breath, rhythmically moving back and forth the short, but crucial, distance between the island and the mainland. The escape route and the steadfast 'welcome back'.

### **Sound recording**

Before I decided to record the interviews I had only recorded sounds from the sea, the ferry and the sheep house. I experimented with using them as a 'backdrop' on the short film. I had no plan to record any conversations, but was convinced otherwise when I brought a sound recorder with me on my next trip to Jøa, aiming to record some of the actual voices of the island. It was an unfamiliar way of working for me, but I slowly got used to it, and learnt that people are as bothered by it as I first expected. I started out with conversations with the couple I stayed with, Bjørg and Torgeir, and Bjørgs parents Åse and Kjell. After showing the piece I also decided to include one of Bjørg and Torgeirs sons, to get the voice of someone from the third generation. He lives in Trondheim now (although he eventually wants to move back), so I invited him to a conversation about his home place and recorded it.

### Case studies

*Åse (1938) and Kjell (1933)*: Kjell grew up on Jøa and worked at Tjøtta in Nordland for a short period. This is where he met Åse, whom he married. They moved to Jøa in 1959 with their first child Bjørg, and later had three sons who no longer live on the island. Åse and Kjell ran the family farm until 1990.

*Bjørg (1959) and Torgeir (1952)*: They grew up on different sides of the island. Both of them left the island to get an education and then came back to run Torgeir's family farm. They had four children during the 80s and are active members of the community. Bjørg is a teacher and sat as mayor from 2007 to 2015 and Torgeir was a farmer until 2003, then started teaching and is at the moment a full-time politician.

*Arne (1989)*: Arne grew up on Jøa, and is the youngest of Bjørg and Torgeir's children. He moved to Namsos, and then Trondheim where he works in a clothing store. He is planning to move back to the island someday.

The sound piece consists of extracts from conversations with these five people, and a few times my voice is also recognizable. By cross clipping the conversations, and sorting them more by themes, than chronologically, I am attempting to give the listeners a sense of life on the island,

both in the past and the present, and with good help from the subjects: to give them a chance to imagine the future.

I have made the sound piece into a three-channel work and wish to use a different speaker for each conversation in my installation at Gråmølna. I chose to use speakers, and not headphones or a sound shower, because I want the conversations in the piece to interact with the rest of the work.

### **Mediating**

I have gathered a substantial amount of material and have spent a lot of time trying to find the best way to mediate it. I have been using progress reviews to sort out images and try to create a narrative that makes sense to the viewer without having to explain anything by text. In the end I am interested in making a publication, in form of a book, to present the images and maybe write some text based on conversations and experiences on the island.

I used the opportunity to test out my work during Open Academy and the progress review at the end of 2015. For me the images all carry a host of stories, either of things happening when I shot them, or stories I have been told by the subjects, but I was not sure how others would perceive them. I received feedback from people who felt like they recognized the scenes I have depicted, or were reminded of something very similar. This convinced me that I have succeeded in my attempts to depict a specific place while still also referencing a more general form of Norwegian scenery and situation.

I have been unsure if I should exhibit a small selection of photographs, or a larger, more substantial selection. I tried out a large series again on a group feedback session with some of the other photo students and Line Løkken. This group feedback gave me a chance to test the ability my photographs have to tell the story on their own. The students who were present were bachelor students and not familiar with my project. I was told to hang my work and not say anything about it. This was a great experience, and it turned out that they absolutely understood what I have been trying to convey. They talked about the ones who stay - the workers who maintain the structure of the everyday - and about a sort of mundane sadness and a certain discomfort of everyday life portrayed with respect. It was clear to them that this was a portrayal of a small village, and they did not feel like they had to know exactly where it is. They also discussed the importance of different photographs, they liked the quantity, while still recognizing that some are more revealing than others.



Figure 4

I have decided to use a substantial amount of photographs and let some of them be 'visual breaks', to let the viewer get some hints as to where this village is and what it looks like, like in *Figure 4*. This image depicts a simple landscape, with bales of hay dynamically positioned along a dirt road. The bales and the fields clearly show that this is an agricultural society, and one of my case studies, Arne, described it as "*typical Jøa, this is what I imagine when I think of home*". But there is no action happening in the image; it is just there, like a nice view, letting you rest your eyes on it if you want to.

In February 2016 I finished an installation on the ferry, consisting of images from my project printed on sticky vinyl and mounted on the walls of the car deck to create a "drive through" gallery. This is an aesthetic form of presentation that makes sense to the ferry experience, and something I started thinking about while working on the island because I want to create a happening there, not just bring all my material to the city without giving anything back to the community of Jøa. I selected four photographs to represent my project. One of them, seen in *Figure 5*, was especially easy to choose. It shows a stroller with a baby, standing alone in a sheep house, maybe only looked after by the sheep in the background. The baby, Louise, was in fact given birth to on the ferry, during a five-minute trip to the main land, and I felt that it was only right to hang a picture of her on the car deck.



Figure 5

### Ongoing development

This project has been developed slowly over time, and to me the final exhibition in May will be a reality check, a way of reflecting critically upon what I have been up to over the past two years. It will not mark the end of the project, but rather function as a good way of figuring out where I am headed, and maybe lead to new directions and ideas as I continue to work with it. I have been offered a solo show in a gallery space on Jøa, and hopefully this show will be realised later this year. I am very pleased to be able to bring the whole project back to the island.

When I first started, before I had decided which village to visit, I thought about working with the village where my mother grew up. This is a place I know well, as previously mentioned. In the end I chose to steer away from the familiar, being afraid that knowing everyone would distract me. I also thought that everyone knowing me there would disable my (already limited) 'objectivity'. Initially I believed I could keep myself out of the project, but while working on Jøa, and discussing my project, I have realised that this is impossible. I have chosen the topic of my project based on my personal stories, and it has been a part of the outcome all along. I also believe it has allowed me to get to know my subjects better, sharing my personal history as they share theirs. My current plan is therefore to make this the next step of my project.

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## List of illustrations

*Figure 1*, from the series "Jøa", Inga Skålnes, 2015, digital photography, personal collection

*Figure 2*, from the series "Jøa", Inga Skålnes, 2015, digital photography, personal collection

*Figure 3*, from the series "Jøa", Inga Skålnes, 2015, digital photography, personal collection

*Figure 4*, from the series "Jøa", Inga Skålnes, 2015, digital photography, personal collection

*Figure 5*, documentation of installation on ferry, Inga Skålnes, 2016, digital photography,  
personal collection