

**Without a Lens:  
Pinhole Photography and the Sensuous Promise of *Friluftsliv***

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**Prepared for: Henrik Ibsen: The Birth of "Friluftsliv"  
A 150 Year International Dialogue Conference Jubilee Celebration  
North Troendelag University College, Levanger, Norway  
Mountains of Norwegian/Swedish border  
September 14 – 19, 2009**

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**Abstract**

This presentation is comprised of written text and photographs of wild experiences that relive a series of ontological experiments. The text represents reflections on these experiences. The photographs, artistic expressions of the same experiences, have been made with a homemade pinhole camera—without a lens and viewfinder—thus demanding special sensual presence during creation. The form of this experimental work is reminiscent of a lyric philosophy (Zwicky, 1992, 2003) that seeks to engage the participant—reader of text and viewer of images—with these experiments. Component pairings are arranged for viewing with text on the left and photographs on the right. Together these pairings invite participants to explore patterned resonances in the world and to probe ontological positioning in spaces beyond what linguistic expression and artistic representation can singularly provide. Implicit throughout are considerations of relationships between wildness, freedom, and *friluftsliv*. Participants are, thus, invited to engage in a crucible of linguistic and visual tensions, to consider patterns that resonate and reveal ontological positions that connect us sensuously and analytically to landscapes that lead us home, to an *oikos*—an ecological household—we can inhabit and love. Participants are also invited to consider the sensuous promise of *friluftsliv*—possibilities to disrupt ontological positioning and to help bring us home. The experiments are situated on the Wind River in Canada's Yukon during July, 2008, and in Rome during September, 2008, and on the Yukon River in August 2009.

**Note to Readers**

The following pages should be viewed in pairs simultaneously facing the participant. The text should be on the left and the images on the right. To minimize distractions for the reader, I have used endnotes to identify references. And, all quotations have been placed in italics. An "Afterword" reflects briefly on some theoretical underpinnings of this work.

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**Part I: Wild *Oikos***

**Frame 1: Bond Creek and Wind River**

Light and rain are coming, a backlit wave flooding across the landscape. How long will it last? How much of my carelessly unpacked gear is scattered about? How wet will it get?

I choose to run—from the unkempt camp. There is little time.

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I have a simple camera with a small hole to allow light in. There can be no staring through a lens, there isn't one. No viewfinder or light meter. How bright is it?

Mario, my photography mentor, says *In pinhole photography you need to be ready to take the picture before you see the picture.*

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Is the horizon level? Does it need to be? There is just one chance—no checking, no certainty, just wild photography in this *self-willed land*.



## Frame 2: Sensuous Canoeing Begins With Good Etiquette

Etiquette is, in its intimate relationships, how we read the landscape, how it flows through us.

Canoeing in wild places is full of activity, scouting routes, leaping in and out of boats, and yarning about last time. This is good. Yukon wilderness is no place to make a mistake. There is joy in paddling hard rapids and long rivers, and a satisfying prudence in preparing for them. No corner is benign. Successful travelling finds the line between cliff and eddy, the edgy experience of place.

For Arne Næss, there can be too much emphasis on activity—running rapids, planning a hike, setting up camp, making dinner—and not enough on activeness. On developing our Selves.

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In wilderness canoeing and pinhole photography, uncertainty is a virtue. Etiquette leads, and activeness follows.

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In sensuous canoeing the river reveals herself; the canoeist is active. In time she enters the traveller in the way of intimate relationships. And, as is the way with intimacy, the traveller looks less and begins to feel the way with activeness and tenderness. River and canoeist become *oikos*—one ecology.

Intimate relationships are edgy, too. Too much activity and not enough activeness, is a harbinger of cliffs and backwaters.



### Frame 3: Arctic Cotton

Singing and swinging  
on the Wind.  
Waving to  
passing canoes.

Hopeless anthropomorphism.

But still, "I know how you feel," I say softly. I feel your hugs, and tears on moist cheeks. We commiserate, communicate, feel.

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Dianne Bos says that, *By using pinhole cameras and long exposure times I record, not an instant, but rather the passage of time at a site.*

Wind rippled fingers and tousled hands bob wildly in blurry riverside gestures.

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Aspersions of anthropomorphism cut *the vocal cords* of these self-willed wavers, and me. Banish them from my *oikos*—my precious household.

I wave back. Damn the cynics—sneering fault-finders. *I become **someone** through what I know*—and do.



#### **Frame 4: Registering Rhythms**

Approaching again, miles downstream I'm reminded of earlier trips when we amused ourselves by imagining one-word poems.

##### **Royal Mountain**

Yep!

It takes days to feel the landscape enter the traveller in the way of intimate relationships, to see this mountain again and respond, with just one word.

*Kintuition* is kicking in: a kind of kinaesthetic intuition, registering rhythm without any identifiable mediation. Self-willed, these feelings and knowings just are. They *don't have reasons: they just announce themselves*. And that is a joy.

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I'm intrigued by the sensuous demands that pinhole photography places my on imagination, and my being.

*Even with an apparently visual medium there is the possibility of transcending the purely visual. It is possible, in other words, to see without staring.*

To register rhythms.

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There is a staking rush in this landscape. Prospectors want to build roads. Mine uranium.

*If this place is fouled by the (seeming) inevitabilities of "progress," the cost of that progress is always going to be part of my life that is lost.*

In the Yukon, my home, it is often easier to register claims, than rhythms.



## Part II: Urban *Oikos*

### Frame 5: The Pantheon

Ancient architecture. The Pantheon is, the guidebook says,

*A perfect hemisphere, and symbol of beauty and harmony.*

In an urban *oikos*.

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Diane Bos, again, on pinhole photography:

*Much of my work centers around contemplative spaces and offers a meditation on time's movement within a still image. Time and light, movement and stillness, memory and the observer: these elements link all of the diverse images I create.*

The half-hour exposure creates a narrative over this photographic eternity.

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The experience announces odd paradoxes, in registering the rhythms of place. Why stop in the doorway oblivious to the crush of travellers behind? No sense? No rhythm?

In Rome, where tripods need licences, a duffle bag will do. Placed in the middle of the floor for a half-hour, it rests unkicked by the numberless, face-up visitors trammelling this space. Perhaps an ancient instinct, a kintuition, has self-willed its way inside the Pantheon, to avert ambulatory obstacles in this household.

A wild vestige in urbanity. A hope.



## **Frame 6: The Accidental Busker**

My plywood camera and I are squeezed between buskers outside the Colosseum.

*Its monumental grandeur and violent history have enthralled and appalled visitors for over 2,000 years.*

On this day modern-time gladiators pose with tourists for photographs, on my port side. To starboard, musical gypsies dance with a bagpipe and tambourine.

These are the wild ones, free air living, even here, the antithesis of digital culture. Ironically they are subjects of digital images *ad nauseam*.

They break from the present, a little at first, to inspect me.

It's only these that are curious enough, or forward enough, to come and talk. In time, the gladiators think the pinhole pictures could be a commercial opportunity. And gypsies and gladiators both linger and ask about this simple wild device.

Perhaps I should put my hat on the ground.



## Frame 7: Pasquino

This is Pasquino, one of Rome's "talking statues" and focal point for political resistance beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Since the Renaissance, Romans have used the statue, and its base, to post criticism and dissent.

Romans linger to affirm Pasquino's continued role in democratic life, and their households. His conversations still work the cracks in consent. But, *what frees the citizen to be boisterous, outspoken, cantankerous?*

How did Ibsen find his way to write, *He who wants may take the church road; I will not, for I am free!*

John Ralston Saul and Arne Næss have said we don't need heroes, or saints. Rather they beckon people to take small steps—to raise wild voices that resist in little ways, that make society dynamic, critical.

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This photograph is for the wild ones who pry the cracks.

Its 75 second exposure allowed this curious photographer to enter the picture for about 30 seconds, to create an ephemeral figure at the base of the statue, reminiscent of those who have walked this path before.



## Afterword

The promise of *friluftsliv*, or free-air-life, it seems, is access to a sensuous world, and through this, access to home, an *oikos*. Yet, while an outdoor life may be necessarily a part of that access, it may not, by itself, be sufficient to appreciate the “spell of the sensuous” (Abram, 1996). What may be required is a more profound disruption of one’s ontological positioning—the ontological shifts required to bring us home.

This work—written and photographic art—relives a series of ontological experiments. It is debatable whether the process of artistic expression can be reduced to methodology. However, if this terminology is helpful in opening inquiry for other scholars, then the methodological shape of this work resembles a form of lyric philosophy (Zwicky, 1992) that seeks to engage the participant—reader of text and viewer of images—with these experiments. Central to this project are tensions between the objectifying project of language, lyric and artistic comprehensions’ flight from linguistic dominance (Zwicky, 2003). The experiments, thus, probe ontological positioning in spaces beyond what linguistic expression and artistic representation can singularly provide. The form is hybrid, including aphorisms, fragments, memories, theoretical bits, and lyrical reflections all in relationship with visual art (cf. Dunlop, 2009). The medium of visual expression is pinhole photography. The experiments are situated on the Wind River in Canada’s Yukon during July and in Rome during September 2008, and the Yukon River in August 2009.

Pinhole photography is more than a quaint hobby or historical artifact. Rather, in a rapidly digitizing historical context, it offers a challenging way of seeing and experiencing the world. There are no viewfinders or light meters—just a simple camera with a small hole, instead of a lens, to allow light to reach photo-sensitive paper, and a photographer who is, in varying degrees, present during the artistic process. It is a process that places sensuous demands on the imagination and, indeed, the artist’s whole being. The pinhole photographer literally feels his or her way across the landscape—sensing approaching storms, movements in the vegetation, and changing light conditions. And, he or she must learn to see without staring through a viewfinder. Simply, it is a kind of free-air-photography

The presentation is organized with textual forms on the left-hand side and visual images on the right, following, in some measure, Jan Zwicky’s *Lyric Philosophy* (1992). The textual bits record my own observations and reflections. On the right-hand side I have placed a series of pinhole photographs. Like any artist I hope these will be evocative—perhaps of deep memories, histories, places, or even dreamscapes.

A final element in this presentation is the work of the participant—the reader of text and viewer of images. Rishma Dunlop (2008) draws on the work of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes to describe “open” or “writable” texts. These texts, she suggests, require the active participation by the reader (and in this case viewer, too) as an artist in the creation of his or her own meaning. In this spirit, I invite readers to engage in this crucible of linguistic, lyric, and visual tensions to consider patterns that resonate, and reveal ontological positions that can connect us sensuously and

analytically to landscapes that lead us home, to an *oikos* we can inhabit and love. Following Zwicky (2003) again:

One might say: ontological understanding is rooted in the perception of patterned resonance in the world.

Philosophy, practised as a setting of things side by side until the similarity dawns, is a form of ontological appreciation. (p. LEFT 7)

This presentation aspires to create contexts to enable ontological appreciation. I also invite readers to consider the importance of this appreciation in their own notions of *friluftsliv*.

In the spirit of open creativity—written and artistic—I remain eager to revise the work through a continuation of these experiments. For the moment, I encourage readers to reflect on their own understanding of relationships between wilderness, freedom, and *friluftsliv* in their own wild and urban homes, amongst shifting and sensuous ontologies, and tensions between linguistic, lyric, and visually artistic understanding.

## Notes

### Frame 1

Find further introductions to pinhole photography at: <http://www.pinholeresource.com> and <http://www.pinhole.com/>

I sense that there might be small variations in the translation of *friluftsliv*. I've used "free-air-life" from Brookes and Dahle (2007). I have also tended to use this English translation in order to juxtapose the words "free," "freedom," "wild," "wildness," and "self-willed" throughout this work and to invite exploration of relationships between the ideas they capture.

Dave Foreman (2000) argues that "wilderness" is derived from Old English "wil-doer-ness" and can be interpreted as "self-willed land."

### Frame 2

I've chosen to use *oikos*, Greek for house or home and etymological root of "Ecology," to capture something of the original spirit of ecology before it was largely—though not entirely—co-opted by science.

### Frame 3

The first quotation is reminiscent of conversations with Dianne Bos in August and September 2008. My memory has been sharpened by her own artist's statement at: <http://www.diannebos.com/about.html>

The second quotation is from David Jardine (1998, p. 94). Emphasis is in the original.

This powerful "cutting the vocal cords" metaphor is taken from a vignette presented by Neil Evernden in his book *The Natural Alien* (1993). It tells of vivisectionists who, as a routine precaution, would sever the vocal cords of animals to avoid distraction caused by cries of pain during operations. As a metaphor it seems to have broad application.

### Frame 4

Kintuition is an idea developed by Dennis Lee (2002).

The next three quotations in this frame are from: Jan Zwicky (1992) p. 92; Neil Evernden, (1985) p. 95; and, David Jardine (1998), p. 95.

### Frame 5

The guidebook quotation is from Cathy Muscat (Ed.) (2008, p. 154).

Dianne Bos's comment is from her artist's statement.

### Frame 6

The quotation is from Cathy Muscat (Ed.) (2008, p. 111).

### Frame 7

The description of citizens in democracies comes from John Ralston Saul (2008), p. 318. In the original he provides his own answer to this question; I prefer to leave it open for further reflection.

The Ibsen lines are from his 1859 poem, "Paa Viddene," translated as "On the Heights," in which the term "friluftsliv" was first used. I have reproduced the translated lines as presented in Hulmes (2007).

Similar sentiments have been expressed by John Ralston Saul (2001) and Arne Næss (Næss & Jickling, 2000).

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