

# Attuning to Place: Performative Documentary Practice Against the Fungibility of Images

## ABSTRACT SUMMARY

In an era in which technical images circulate as “placeholders”, tokens, proxies, or algorithmically retrievable stand-ins, photographic space increasingly becomes fungible. A photograph can serve as an interchangeable representation of a location the viewer may never visit, rendering the place less an embodied environment and more a logistical interface. Helsinki Photomedia’s theme articulates this condition as a tension between localisation and fungibility, between an image’s claim to grounded specificity and its infrastructural drift across screens, models, and datasets.

As Steyerl (2013) argues, contemporary digital images often circulate in degraded or “poor” forms, drifting far from the sites and contexts in which they were originally produced. Paglen (2016, 2021) extends this critique by showing how a growing class of images, those generated for or interpreted by machine vision systems, function primarily as operational data rather than human-oriented representations. Then, Zylinska (2017, 2020) similarly contends that contemporary photographic practices are increasingly shaped by nonhuman and computational agencies, shifting photography toward a more distributed, posthuman mode of seeing. At risk is the removal of the unique experience and specific performance, an invisible entanglement

This paper positions community-engaged documentary pedagogy in rural fringe environments as a counter-infrastructure. Drawing on a five-year longitudinal study of *Stokkøya Dok*, a rural documentary field laboratory in coastal Norway, I argue that embodied, place-based filmmaking practices disrupt placeholder logics by demanding co-presence, mutual negotiation, and sustained engagement. And thus, disrupting three dominant tendencies in digital photographic systems: (1) fungibility: the capacity of images to be exchanged or substituted without loss within platform infrastructures; (2) proxy ecologies: the use of images as stand-ins for absent bodies, events, or sites; and (3) accelerated temporality: the compression of production rhythms to match platform logics.

The films produced in this workshop are inseparable from the relational and temporal conditions that generated them. By requiring students to work in temporal alignment with the rhythms of place: cooking together, walking together, waiting on tides or weather, responding to the spontaneous timing of conversation and trust, the films produced at *Stokkøya Dok* refuse the logic of placeholders. Rather than standing in for place, they emerge as co-presence artifacts, embodied and entangled traces of situated co-authorship that cannot be detached, substituted, or circulated as proxies. Their meaning rests in the time held together, not in representational equivalence. As imaging systems grow more automated and detached, this approach reasserts the value of encounter, specificity, embodied co-authorship, and sustainable imaging ecologies in making place.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a practice-based artistic research methodology (Borgdorff, 2012; Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014), drawing from five years of field pedagogy, instructor reflection, student feedback, community dialogues, and close analysis of approximately thirty student films produced from 2020 to 2025.

Fieldwork is structured through what I describe as the *entangled mode*, a pedagogical configuration in which filmmaker, subject, environment, and technology mutually shape outcomes. Rather than treating documentary as a representational act, the entangled mode emphasizes co-presence, negotiation, reflection, and relational becoming, aligning with current scholarship on more-than-human imaging (Confente, 2025), and dialogic documentary ethics (Aufderheide et al., 2020).

## CONTRIBUTION

A key component of this *entanglement mode* is temporal attunement. Unlike classroom time - segmented, managed, predictable - field time is emergent and relational. It unfolds through the tacit timings of daily life: tides, labor rhythms, weather, shared meals, storytelling patterns, and the slow accrual of trust. Pink (2021) describes such temporal grounding as “situated sensing,” in which knowledge arises through embodied alignment with place. Students learn not simply *in* place but *with* place, synchronizing their creative tempo with environmental and communal rhythms.

Crucially, these dynamics were not idiosyncratic to Stokkøya alone. Across five years of field immersion, recurring patterns emerged: temporal rhythms shaped by weather and tides, ethics of proximity within a small population, spontaneous invitations and refusals, visibility negotiated through local norms, and public screenings operating as collective interpretive events. To theorize these dynamics without treating Stokkøya as representative, or turning it into a placeholder for “the rural”, the study develops a fictionalized rural fringe site, a composite derived from accumulated fieldnotes, student reflections, and community interactions. This conceptual site is methodologically aligned with sensory ethnography (Pink, 2021), non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007), and artistic research practices wherein composite environments allow for generalization. It functions as a theoretical device to understand how relational, temporal, and ethical dynamics travel across contexts while remaining grounded in empirical observation. This speculative space, coastal, remote, climatically unstable, and culturally layered, functions as a conceptual laboratory for extending principles of temporal attunement, relational ethics, and co-authorship across varied geographies.

## ADDITIONAL NOTATION

The conference presentation will include brief excerpts from student films and community screening events, presented as research material that evidences how embodied co-presence, negotiated visibility, and temporal attunement shape the resulting images.

## KEYWORDS

community-engaged documentary; temporal attunement; performative; entanglement; placeholder logics

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