

Abstract to the Visual Research Conference, November 14-16, 2016, Minneapolis:

## Visuality re-acting

Ardis Storm-Mathisen & Jo Helle-Valle

In this paper we present a case from the Botswana part of the Kalahari to demonstrate how visual data – in interplay with time, place and talk – generated a series of events and produced new valuable insights about past and present life and relationships that would not have come about without the visual documentary elements. We argue that the use of visual data in this case had four interrelated functions which together generated very useful new insights methodologically, epistemologically and theoretically.

In 1990, on fieldwork in a Kalahari village, one of the authors of this paper took a picture of a grandmother together with her grandchild whom she was the main caretaker of. Returning to the field in 2016, with a printed picture of the two, it set off a series of events. It turned out that our host not only recognized the two on the picture, but in fact was the grandmother's niece. With great enthusiasm she called the grandmother to the house to show her the picture. This generated a dialogue between the two old women – and us – which soon brought forth stories about their own childhoods and upbringing. This again prompted visits to the old deserted village site of their upbringing, a place they had not been for several decades as the village had been moved due to lack of water. Being back at the place of their childhood further spurred their memories and a series of detailed stories about their experiences at this place was revealed to us – and in part captured on video.

We argue that visual data has had a four-fold function in this unfolding of events: First, the picture from 1990 became an actant (in an ANT sense) in that it *spurred memories and relationships* of various kinds, thus generating valuable data. Secondly, it brought us to *locate a historical site*. Thirdly, being situated at the site of their childhood the grandmother and her niece remembered and narrated to us events and facts they otherwise would not have conveyed. Fourth, by photographing and in-part filming this sequence of events in 2016, we were all given the opportunity to use this documentation to *further dwell, reflect and explore on the themes they narrated*. In all, what we experienced was *visuality re-acting*.

Our case thus has three advantages of using visual data: *Methodologically*, by using own visual data as a means for making things happen, creating situations that generate new data. *Epistemologically* by using the same visual data as triggers for creating language-games that are of direct use for acquiring new data. And *theoretically* by highlighting how reproduced visual data enter directly into in-field practices as actants.