

# PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE SOVIET SETTLEMENTS ON SVALBARD

Elin Haugdal (UiT The Arctic University of Norway)

## Abstract

*Photographic recordings from the 1950s–1970s give us glimpses into the Soviet settlements on Svalbard during the Cold War period. The majority of these pictures have been taken by Norwegians during friendly exchanges with the inhabitants in Barentsburg and Pyramiden, and demonstrate how important culture and sport were as a contact zone. These pictures also testify that the Soviets invested more seriously in their welfare, culture, education and family life on Svalbard than the Norwegians did. Photography seems to be a way of seeing, meeting and understanding others, and a way of confirming the existence of a common world on Svalbard. However, the Soviet Consul's strict control of photographing practices may be seen as part of a propagandizing regime, in line with the Soviet imagery which spread even to this remote Arctic place. Owing to the cultural museums' digitizing projects and to private sharing on social media, photographs from this period have become increasingly available, but without rules or guiding principles as to how to put them together and interpret them. Thus, to the contemporary viewer these images offer the possibility to make visual montages, and to reveal the singular image's meanings well beyond both the Soviet authorities' and the photographer's control. This article, while making such a montage, discusses how photography might shape and change our historical understanding of people and places.*

## Keywords

*Photographic culture 1950s–1970s, Soviet imagery, the Governor of Svalbard's archive, cultural exchanges, Herta Grøndal, Barentsburg, Pyramiden, Coles Bay, Grumant*

Sources about life in the Soviet settlements on Svalbard throughout the Cold War era are sparse. Written descriptions of these communities may occur as a single chapter or a short paragraph in the general historical narratives on Svalbard.<sup>1</sup> Stories about everyday life of the inhabitants are even harder to find both in Russian and Norwegian contexts.<sup>2</sup> However, one particular kind of visual source on the topic, namely photographs taken in the 1950s–60s onwards, is becoming more and more accessible, and a key factor in understanding the past.

These pictures – mostly from Barentsburg and Pyramiden, but also quite a few from Coles Bay and Grumant – have been taken by more or less professional photographers, by visitors and tourists from the Norwegian settlements of Longyearbyen and Ny Ålesund. Singular photographs from private albums, as well as extensive photo archives, have recently been made publicly available through private persons sharing them in social

<sup>1</sup> See Balstad 1955, passim; Arlov 2003, 396–416; Arlov and Hoel 2004; Evjen 1993. However, there are published essayistic and visual documentaries on Pyramiden, see Fløgstad 2007 and Bjerck, Olsen, Andreassen 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Confirmed by Kinossian and Gerlach 2016.



media and through cultural museums' digitization projects. The non-chronology of shared digitized pictures in social media or in the archives offer the contemporary viewer a visual montage of the Soviet settlements and the people living there. The primary objective of this article is to (re-)set some of these images "into circulation" and make them speak (Rancière 2018, *passim*). Currently, and simply owing to availability, the scope of visual sources limits itself to photographs recorded and disseminated within a Norwegian context. The pictures, then, tell us about relations between the two main groups of Svalbard inhabitants, Norwegian and Soviet citizens, on a global, political level being opponents in a Cold War, but on a local level being the only neighbours at this remote place in the Arctic.

As I have looked through thousands of pictures, three categories have been my guiding principles to choose only a dozen of them to present. Firstly, I have looked for pictures of the people in the Soviet communities, pictures that tell us about their lifeworld. Very often, Arctic communities are represented by images of men in harsh environment, pictured either just after a hard shift in a black coal mine, or whilst defeating the white wilderness. However, the photographic material I have investigated invites instead to explore the life of women and children, as well as a different side of masculinity. The photographs discussed in this article intend to be representative of the population of the Soviet settlements, yet are conversely compared to the existing image of both the Arctic and Soviet life.

Secondly, I have chosen pictures which demonstrate the visuality, visual culture and self-representation of these Soviet communities, as it appears in posters, artworks, material objects and built surroundings, and is rendered on numerous photographs. Being aware of changes in the visual culture and the environment, I have picked pictures which seem representative of the decades, respectively the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Thirdly, I have chosen pictures which are open to revealing their meanings to the contemporary viewer well beyond both the Soviet authorities' and the photographer's control. These pictures have been selected because they attract my attention, as a sort of *punctum*, according to Roland Barthes, in the schematic studium of a digitized archive (Barthes 1981). Related to this, I have included pictures which bear witness to the photographer and the photographic culture, both to unveil how images are naturalized in our culture, and to underscore the construction of both photography and history. To recognize the specific ways in which visual sources are integrated in the experience of history, and how visual sources contribute to and construct our understanding of people, history and society, is one of this article's objectives.

Needless to say, it is of immense importance to be aware of what is not there on the picture, of people and happenings that are not represented in these photo collections. They have either never been recorded or their photographic representations have disappeared without much trace. One of the reasons for such absences, which I will return to at the end of my article, is that foreign photographers' motifs were as a rule strongly restricted; photographers were not allowed to move freely in the settlements and choose their objects themselves. Another reason is that there are huge amounts of visual sources which have not yet been shared publicly, and will probably never be.

These collections of available photographs reveal three overall findings, as I see them, which will be explained in detail in the following sections. Firstly, the majority of the pictures from the 1950s–70s have been recorded during friendly exchanges between the Norwegians and the inhabitants in Barentsburg and Pyramiden. The photographs demonstrate how important culture and sport were as a contact zone, and that such international meetings were appreciated by people on both sides of the border. Additionally, the pictures witness that the Russians invested more seriously in their welfare, culture and education on Svalbard than the Norwegians, which is confirmed by written sources.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, according to the photographic motifs, Norwegian photographers tend to seek the differences and the exotic in Russian/Soviet culture – paradoxically enough, against the backdrop of the very same conditions that both nations on the archipelago share. My third central point is how the activity of making photographs seems to be a way of seeing, meeting and understanding others, and a transformation of “seeing into being”, both in a contemporary community and in retrospect.<sup>4</sup> Photography builds up identity, Russian/Soviet as well as Norwegian, and at the same time confirms the existence of a “common world” on Svalbard.

#### **“Welcome, dear Norwegian guests”**

The people living in the Norwegian and the Soviet settlements on Svalbard in the decades after World War II had a great deal in common. Harsh climate, mining-related work, everyday life regulated by company town rules, a male-dominant society, sparse contact with the outer world and isolation during the 5-6 winter months were the realities in both Norwegian and Soviet settlements. Ny Ålesund and Longyearbyen were defined as company towns, ruled by Kings Bay Kull Compani and Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (SNSK), and so were Barentsburg, Grumant and Pyramiden, governed from Moscow by the mining company Trust Arktikugol (the Trust). There were, however, significant differences between the Norwegian and the Soviet communities on the archipelago, mostly owing to the respective political systems and priorities dictated by the states of Norway and the USSR. And, because of the global politics of the Cold War, the borders between the settlements were accentuated, even if there were no physical walls or barbed wire on Svalbard.

Actually, Svalbard was on the periphery of the Cold War. Even if the Arctic in general was strategically very important, Svalbard was largely spared military activity. The Norwegian government established a “low tension policy” not to provoke the Soviets, a policy reflected in the correspondence between the Governor in Longyearbyen and the Russian Consul in Barentsburg.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Risanger 1978, 101–106 and passim; Evjen 1993, who describes the welfare system in Barentsburg in the 1930s, with good treatment of children and hundreds of men and women in education; Arlov 2003, 367–368.

<sup>4</sup> Kivelson and Neuberger 2008, 6. I will explore this statement later in the text, in the section “Images activated”.

<sup>5</sup> The Governor’s Archive, the folders dated 1950s to 1970s and titled “The Russians”, Statsarkivet i Tromsø.

Nonetheless, to visit one's neighbour on the other side of "the border", one needed permission from the Norwegian Governor or from the Russian Consul. You also had to get a place on board a non-regular vessel taking you there. But the real barrier between the Soviet and the Norwegian people was the language.<sup>6</sup> Despite these constraints, all the historical sources tell us that the Russians and the Norwegians on the archipelago were living in peace and mutual respect (see Balstad 1955; Hoel 1966, 404; Arlov 2003, 411–12; Evjen 1993, 13–22).

The Soviet Trust Arktikugol started their coal mining in Grumant and Barentsburg in the early 1930s, and experienced a rapid growth in population. Women and children were integrated in a family community almost immediately (Evjen 1993). After World War II and the destruction of most of the settlements, both Pyramiden and Barentsburg were built up anew. Barentsburg became the Russian "capital" on Svalbard when in 1950 the Soviet consulate had been moved there from Pyramiden. The Soviet settlements continued their well-developed welfare infrastructure, including cultural centres, libraries, schools and education (for both children and grownups), kindergartens, hospitals etc., which far exceeded what was available in the Norwegian settlements (see Fig. 1, 14, 19, 21, 22 and 23). Barentsburg and Pyramiden even got coal-heated greenhouses with vegetables and flowers, which was quite an exotic motif in the Arctic (see Fig. 7). Many workers in the Soviet settlements came from Ukraine (mostly from the Donbass region).<sup>7</sup> In the 1950s–70s it was more common for the Soviet miners than the Norwegian ones to bring their families over for a limited stay. Pyramiden, which reached the population of more than 1000 residents in the 1970s, became an idealistic model of Soviet society (Fløgstad 2007; Bjerck et al. 2010). From Grumant, however, very few photographic recordings are available, even though this Soviet settlement had been the closest to Longyearbyen and the largest in the number of inhabitants until it was abandoned in 1961–62. In total, from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s, the ratio between Russian and Norwegian citizens on the archipelago was quite stable at approximately 2:1.<sup>8</sup>

At a national and political level, the Soviet presence on Svalbard was one of the most difficult areas to handle for the Norwegian Governor there. "Both the mining operation and the population were considered instruments in the Svalbard policy, and also part of foreign policy."<sup>9</sup> At a local level, however, the Governor's interaction with the Russians was friendly and cooperative to meet the population's common economic, social and cultural needs. The Norwegian Governor and the Soviet Consul communicated through

<sup>6</sup> Risanger 1978, 200. Risanger was the editor of the local newspaper *Svalbardposten* from 1976 to 1978.

<sup>7</sup> In Soviet times, most workers were Ukrainian, according to Bespalov 2017. The miners came to the Arctic from Donbass, the service staff from Volyn. This is confirmed in Risanger 1978, 98, referring to an "illegal" reportage from Barentsburg in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen* in August 1976.

<sup>8</sup> According to Statistics Norway, available in Arlov 2003, 367–368; <http://www.ssb.no/a/histstat/svalbard/tab3.html>. In the early 1980s, when the number of residents on Svalbard as a whole was at its peak of approximately 4000, the majority lived in Pyramiden and Barentsburg. Since the early 1990s, the population in these two settlements has been decreasing. Pyramiden was abandoned in 1998, and the decline of population in Barentsburg continued. The statistics does not discriminate between Russians and Ukrainians, or other national backgrounds.

<sup>9</sup> Arlov and Hoel 2004, 415. See *ibid.*, 351, for Norway and the Soviet Union on Svalbard after World War II. See also Frydenlund 1982, 63.

telegrams (more than once a week) and visited each other (more often than once a month, during the ice-free period). Only very few telegrams from the 1950–70 period contain the realities of the global Cold War or political tensions in the Arctic.<sup>10</sup> Exceptions are the reactions to the Soviet Union’s nuclear tests in autumn 1961, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which created a temporary break in the sports and cultural exchanges.<sup>11</sup> Generally, the tone between these nations’ officials on Svalbard is always polite and friendly.

“Welcome to Pyramiden, dear Norwegian guests!”. This text on a sign in the Russian harbour of Pyramiden was the main focus in a black-and-white photograph from the mid-1950s (Fig. 3). Three men and a woman are lined up with their bags and suitcases, obviously on the call of the photographer Erling Nødtvedt. Nødtvedt, a pastor on Svalbard who lived in Longyearbyen from 1951 to 1960, has left behind more than 3600 photographic recordings, though only a few from the Russian settlements. Visits between the Norwegians and the Russians in the 1950s, like the one represented in this photograph, were mostly official in nature. The Norwegians were invited on special occasions, e.g. the celebrations of the October socialist revolution, which happened every 7th November. The two neighbouring nations also arranged mutual exchanges in sports and cultural sphere which, during the 1950s, were to be established as regular happenings throughout the year – and still exist today (see Fig. 2, 3, 4, and 6).<sup>12</sup> These exchanges gave non-officials, both on the Norwegian and the Russian side, the opportunity to visit their neighbour towns. However, the choice and control of the visitors was quite strict, at least on the Soviet side.

The four persons on this photograph from 1956 are most probably part of a larger group, and the occasion for their stay in Pyramiden may be a cultural exchange of some kind. Equipped with camera and a music instrument case, they seem prepared to perform, as well as to do sightseeing, during their visit to this little place under Soviet control. Their frontal poses and faces may be interpreted as expressing different expectations. Nevertheless, the words in Norwegian over their heads should leave no doubt about the Russians’ hospitality. Nødtvedt also took pictures of equivalent welcoming signs, even bigger in size, on a visit to Barentsburg the same year. The sign placed on the coal black hillside over the harbour could be seen from a long distance, as Norwegians were arriving by the Governor’s boat, *Nordsysse*.<sup>13</sup>

During the decades after 1950, camera was in hands of almost everyone on both sides of the border. The Norwegians shot pictures on their travels to the Russian settlements, and the Russians shot back, as it were (Fig. 4 and 5). The cameras were usually directed

<sup>10</sup> The Governor’s Archive, “The Russians”, Statsarkivet Tromsø; Horensma 1991; see also Arlov 2003 and Risanger 1978.

<sup>11</sup> The Soviet nuclear tests are the main topic in the diplomatic telegrams exchanged between the Governor and the Consul in November 1966. See the Governor’s archive, box 61, folder “Russerne 1960-61”. Also see Evjen 1993, 22; and Arlov 2003, 412.

<sup>12</sup> On the significance of these exchanges, see Risanger 1978, 198, and elsewhere. According to Evjen 2004, 166, these exchanges started in 1938.

<sup>13</sup> See SVF 08090.tif and SVF 08093.tif, <http://bildearkiv.svalbardmuseum.no/fotoweb/archives/5000-Historiske%20bilder/Indekserte%20bilder/SVF%2008090.tif.info>

at regular joint sports and cultural activities, and there exist a great deal of photographs of ski runners ready at the start line, cheering spectators, chess-players in deep concentration and folk dancers on stage. In the 1960s, the number of travellers between the settlements increased on both sides, and the Soviet settlements and Longyearbyen (to a lesser degree Ny Ålesund) became a destination for both cultural exchanges and football matches between the two nations. The Russians would often send up to eighty “amateur artists” to perform folk dances or music, and a large number of sportsmen. The Russian ship *Donbass* had a larger capacity than the Norwegian *Nordsyssel* (operating on Svalbard 1952–1978), and it was not uncommon that *Donbass* shipped the Norwegians to and from Barentsburg or Pyramiden. The Russians even arrived in Longyearbyen in their permanently stationed helicopters (from 1966, see Fig. 17). In other words, it was a great official willingness on both sides to facilitate reciprocal visits, to testify that “both the Soviet and Norwegian people at Spitsbergen want to live in peace and friendship”, as a Russian Consul stated, expressing his gratitude after a sports exchange: “We sincerely believe that historically formed good neighbouring relations of our peoples will be everlasting and will be improved”.<sup>14</sup>

The role of the camera in the meetings between people is demonstrated in the photographs taken when the Norwegian visitors arrive in Pyramiden or Barentsburg by boat. Instead of waving hands or performing similar greeting rituals, people would lift their cameras. A photograph probably made in the mid-1960s shows a dozen of coat-clothed men on the quay in one of Russian settlements waiting for the vessel to arrive. Nearly all are equipped with cameras and some have climbed up concrete slabs to get a better position to photograph from (Fig. 5). In another picture from the same decade, a row of men on the bow of the Murmansk-registered vessel “*Indigirka* are ready to take pictures of people and places in Pyramiden. In addition to be the foremost sign of the modern tourist, this photographing practice in Svalbard seems to be reciprocal. Not only the visitors are equipped with cameras, searching for objects worth recording, but also the settlement inhabitants see their guests through the lens. This reciprocity has to do with the general recording “photographic eye” of modern culture (see Haugdal 2017, 263). Yet we may also assume that it has to do with the rare visits of people from “outside”, and long periods of isolation. The importance of taking pictures of people, places and cultural phenomena might even have to do with the inhabitants’ experience of the non-permanent life on Svalbard. There are no natives; all are visitors, living on the archipelago for quite a short time, probably. This awareness of transient life goes for the Russians and Ukrainians even more than for the Norwegians.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the functions of photographing and photographs are complex. Photographing is a way of seeing, of searching for similarities and differences, furthering communication, conveying an understanding of the world on the “other side” – and, last but not least – a production of memory.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A telegram in English from the Consul Ignat Sheiko to the Governor Odd Birkeland of 10 March 1958. The Governor’s archive, box 61, folder “Russerne 1957-59”.

<sup>15</sup> The Russian and Ukrainian workers on Svalbard got two-year contracts to begin with.

<sup>16</sup> On photography from Svalbard as “memory machine”, see Haugdal 2017, 286–287.

The photographs also display a tourist gaze. From the late 1960s and during the 1970s onwards, the Governor arranged exchanges for groups of local tourists. Visiting Russian settlements was a very popular activity. However, the number of visitors had to be limited.<sup>17</sup> When looking into the photographic motifs, one observes that they slightly change in this period and witness a search for the exotic and the authentic, more than looking for and depicting mutual interests in the culture and people of their respective neighbourhoods. Aesthetically, the photographs made in the 1970s differ from the ones made in the two former decades first and foremost by the use of colour film and their snapshot-like qualities, capturing in-between moments, motifs taken from behind rather than frontally, from a distance or heavily cropped, rendering memorable moments to show to friends and family and to save in private albums (Fig. 6 and 7).

### **Photographic practices**

When cameras began to be owned by nearly everyone and no longer by the privileged few, there was of course a general growth in the number of pictures taken, and more generally an increasing interest in photography and visual culture. In Longyearbyen, there were arranged photo courses and established photo clubs for amateurs, and photographs were shared and commented on. Recently digitized private photographs from this period are frequently published on social media, and prove the growing interest in photography in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the most comprehensive collections of photographs from the Soviet settlements seem so far to be located at museums. The Svalbard Museum has digitized a huge amount of pictures and made them available for everyone. A search in their photo collection produces more than a thousand hits from the Russian settlements. Of these, in the Cold War years, approximately 300 photos come from Barentsburg and eighty from Pyramiden (recorded by different photographers), and nearly forty from Grumant and Coles Bay (recorded by the Governor's deputy Carl A. Wendt in 1960).<sup>19</sup> At the Arctic University Museum of Norway (TMU) there exist, from the same decades, roughly a hundred photographs from Barentsburg, fifty from Pyramiden (the Herta Lampert archive) and about twenty from Grumant.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the most comprehensive collection of photographs from the Soviet settlements from the 1950s to the mid-1970s is in the hands of Grøndal foto and deposited at Svalbard Museum.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The names of selected visitors for these trips are listed in the Governor's archive. See also Risanger 1978, 237.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the Facebook group "Gamle Svalbard"; Haugdal 2017, 283.

<sup>19</sup> Svalbard Museum's digital photo collection, visited 30 April 2019.

<sup>20</sup> TMU's digital photo collection, visited 29 April 2019. Herta was born Niedermayer, married a Grøndal in her Svalbard period, and later a Lampert, after she moved back to Austria in the mid-1970s.

<sup>21</sup> Eva Grøndal, the daughter of Leif and Herta Grøndal, has collected, categorized and digitized the photographs left over from both her parents. <https://www.grondalfoto.no/> (visited 30 April 2019) shows 365 photographs from Pyramiden and Barentsburg (unfortunately, all categorized as "Pyramiden"). Leif Grøndal's photographs will soon be available on the Svalbard Museum's website. The number of his recordings from the Soviet settlements is unknown.

Kjell Fjørtoft (1930–2010), a Norwegian journalist and historian, should also be mentioned, even though only twenty-three of his recordings at the Arctic University Museum of Norway include his photographs from the Soviet settlements on Svalbard. In 1971 he visited Coles Bay and Grumant, while searching for a Soviet prison camp in this area, which he reported to his newspaper *Dagbladet*. In the Governor's archive there exist notes on Fjørtoft's reports, and on the Governor's previous inspections to detect such a camp.<sup>22</sup> Journalists could not usually get access to the Soviet settlements, thus it is hard to find pictures taken by news reporters in the archives. However, the journalist and editor of *Svalbardposten* in Longyearbyen Otto Risanger (b. 1945) got access in the late 1970s and has published photographs in his book *Russerne på Svalbard. Hvem er de? Hva gjør de?* Most other photographs, which are now digitally available, were shot in connection with invited visits from the Consul, and the photographers' admittance was restricted to designated areas.

Leif Archie Grøndal (1914–1991) was the first to have the role as an “official photographer” for the Governor on his visits to the Soviet settlements in the early 1950s. Grøndal was actually employed in mining but assigned as a photographer both by his mining company SNSK and by the Governor. The Governor's archive, in the folders labelled “Russerne” (“Russians”), gives small glimpses into the relations between the Norwegian and the Soviet officials on Svalbard. In a telegram in the early 1950s, the Governor Håkon Balstad typically announces his travel to the Consul Ignat Sheiko in Barentsburg: “23<sup>rd</sup> of October 15 o'clock Moscow time *stop* My new deputy mr Haddeland and his wife will be coming with us and so will our mutual friend mr. Grøndahl [sic] with his camera / sincerely yours / Håkon Balstad”.<sup>23</sup> Leif Grøndal joined Governor Balstad on more visits to the Russian authorities in the following years. His photographs represent the official picture of the relationship between the Norwegians and the Russians. However, his pictures also put the social gatherings after the formal meetings on display.<sup>24</sup> Leif Grøndal left behind more than 5000 photographs, which are in the process of being digitized.<sup>25</sup> In the 1960s, the Governor himself, or his deputy, were equipped with cameras on their visit to the Russians.

Herta Grøndal (1930-2019) worked as a photographer on Svalbard during the period from 1952 to 1974, and continued to visit the archipelago regularly until 2008. Herta Grøndal continued her husband's engagement as a photographer for the mining company SNSK, and for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) documenting official events on Svalbard from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, as well as engaging in feature photography and documentary films. She had many private commissions, and major publications on Svalbard's life and history have reprinted her pictures (see Hoel 1966;

<sup>22</sup> Fjørtoft's photo collection at the Arctic University Museum of Norway counts more than 300 recordings from Svalbard as a whole.

<sup>23</sup> The Government's Archive, Box 61, folder “Russerne 1949-53”.

<sup>24</sup> Some of Leif Archie Grøndal's pictures from Barentsburg are reprinted in the Governor's wife Liv Balstad's book *North of the Desolate Sea*, published in 1955.

<sup>25</sup> All the pictures of Governor Balstad have been taken by Leif Grøndal, who participated in the governor's travels. Eva Grøndal, interviewed 29 April 2015.



Drivenes et al 2004). Even Russian officials ordered pictures from Herta Grøndal.<sup>26</sup> Most of the known and available photographs of the Soviet settlements from the mid-1950s to the 1970s were actually shot by her. Herta Grøndal's pictures circulated both in and outside Svalbard, and today her photo archive is one of the most important visual sources for understanding and tracking changes in the Svalbard communities throughout the second half of 20th century.

Herta Grøndal's first visit to Barentsburg took place in 1957, and she became one of the few individuals given the opportunity to move around the Soviet settlements more freely.<sup>27</sup> She played piano and was allowed to take part in cultural exchanges. She joined the Governor as a photographer on his trips, and later got access to the Soviet settlements on her own (see a telegram and a note dated 21.4.1966 in the Governor's archive).

Taking pictures in the Soviet settlements was considered suspicious activity and subject to severe restrictions. Even during this post-Stalin epoch in the late 1950s – early 1960s the photographers were prevented from contacting the locals, and their motifs were controlled (Arlov 2003, 411). This was not without a reason. A Svalbard veteran living in Longyearbyen since the 1960s recalls that on his sports exchanges to Barentsburg and Pyramiden he was actually equipped by the counter-intelligence service with an expensive camera, with the mission to record whatever was of interest to the Governor of Svalbard (Berg 2019; see also Arlov 2003, 411–12). However, Herta Grøndal says in an interview from 2006 that the Soviets “let me in and allowed me to take pictures from the mines and the assembly house. I obviously managed to be a nice girl, and only moved where they had explicitly allowed me. Otherwise, I could be categorized as ‘spy’.”<sup>28</sup> She adds: “It was a pleasure to visit the Russians. They always made it clean and nice before my visits”. Herta Grøndal's photographic practice on the other side of the iron curtain also received attention from the Norwegian authorities, according to Grøndal herself: “The Norwegian counter-intelligence has confirmed that there exists quite a comprehensive folder on me.”<sup>29</sup> Grøndal says that she had never sneaked around to take pictures, and generally behaved not to provoke. She was also well aware that the inhabitants in closed Soviet communities were surveilled and risked to be returned to the mainland if they were too open towards “the West” (Skinn 2006). The control was no less strict when Russians visited the Norwegian settlements.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The Governor's Archive, “Russerne”. Letter from Herta Grøndal to Governor Landsverk, dated “Drammen 16.6.1964.”

<sup>27</sup> This happened during the so-called “Thaw”, a period of post-Stalinist liberalization after Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power (1956-1964). The USSR was experiencing an unprecedented “warming-up” in all social and cultural spheres, probably also in the culture of Arctic settlements, see Kozlov and Gilburd 2013. After the Thaw, however, the Cold War became colder, and the Arctic more heavily militarized than ever.

<sup>28</sup> Svarstad 2006, 73, my translation.

<sup>29</sup> Svarstad 2006, 73. Herta Grøndal interviewed.

<sup>30</sup> In 2006, the BBC made an interview with Boris Ocherednyuk, who had lived in Barentsburg since the early 1980s. Ocherednyuk said: “We could only go to [the Norwegian town of] Longyearbyen if we were accompanied by a KGB agent,” and were not allowed to look either at fashion magazines “with beautiful clothes and people in them”, or the Bible in the church. Ben Tobias, “Cold War Haunts Arctic Outpost”, [bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6204427.stm), December 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6204427.stm> (accessed April 2019).

The photographic practices of the photographers on Svalbard, professionals or amateurs, are directly connected to mobility. The individual mobility is not only restricted by the Cold War border politics but also by the cold climate and limited transportation. The Russians in Barentsburg possessed strong icebreakers, and thus their winter mobility was a bit better than in other settlements. Until the late 1960s, when the first snowmobile was imported in Longyearbyen, travelling between the settlements in winter was very limited as it took place by means of dogsled and ski.<sup>31</sup> On the other side, the Soviet authorities on Svalbard were in possession of three helicopters since the 1960s, while the Norwegian Governor had none (until 1976). However, language, as mentioned before, must be added as a real barrier between the Soviets and the Norwegians, despite the lack of “barbed wire” and “visa requirements” between the settlements on Svalbard (Risanger 1978, 200). Furthermore, the social mobility is essential, dependent not only on one’s profession, class and gender, but also on individual freedom and courage.

The use of camera may be seen as one way of overcoming these barriers. Thus, the photographic practice of Herta Grøndal is notable, as a young woman in the early 1950s, who was allowed to visit the Russians, and as an experienced photographer in the 1960s and 1970s, who tried to make a living in a male-dominated company town at 78 degrees north.<sup>32</sup> There were of course other citizens from the Norwegian settlements who travelled to the Russian side, on private or official visits, taking pictures, but none to such an extent and as systematically as Herta Grøndal. While tourist photographs are often shot on short and strictly regulated visits, Herta Grøndal documented Svalbard’s landscape and wild life, settlements and built structures, as well as the people working and living on the archipelago. She is one of the very few photographers who have actually depicted the individuality of Arctic-based Soviet people. Her long-standing photographic practice on Svalbard, and large amounts of pictures, reveal images that change our prejudices about Soviet culture, the Cold War climate and the harsh and masculine communities both in the Norwegian and in the Soviet settlements in the post-WWII decades.

### **Soviet imagery**

The explosive growth in the photographic culture in the 1950s–70s is one of the phenomena demonstrated in Herta Grøndal’s pictures and through her own practice. The increasing number of cameras, the reproduction and dissemination of pictures affect the construction of self and others and have a strong impact on collective identity. We should therefore ask what the Norwegians were guided to see while visiting the Soviet settlements, and what kind of motifs the visitors actually depicted. What do these pictures tell us about the Soviet self-representation? The Russians were proud of their settlements,

Nevertheless, during visits to Longyearbyen, glossy, Western magazines of great variety (from porn to fashion) did change hands (according to Otto Risanger 1978, 237 ff.).

<sup>31</sup> In the 1970s, snowmobiles entered common use and the mobility among the Norwegian civilians increased. The Governor replaced dogs with snow tracks from spring 1966. Thus, into the 1970s, the degree of mobility on the archipelago between the individual dwellers in the Norwegian and the Soviet settlements was distributed unevenly.

<sup>32</sup> For a more thorough introduction of Herta Grøndal, see Haugdal 2017, 3–6 in particular, and Eva Grøndal 2008, 106–112.

especially Pyramiden, which was built up after World War II to become an ideal city, according to both communist and non-communist expectations. The authorities and inhabitants of course welcomed the Norwegians – and their cameras – to depict and disseminate images of the rehearsed route through the Soviet presence on Svalbard. Photographs and films were an important part of the mutual exchange, and the propagandistic function of such visual media should not be underestimated.<sup>33</sup> Photography held a strong position in the Soviet Union, however regulated by the same political-aesthetic rules as all other visual art forms, namely socialist realism, and of a certain kind demanding “that a photograph has to be bigger than a depiction of reality: it must represent a dream, a symbol, a communist ideal” (Iskakova and Zueva 2015).

The most common motif in the visual culture of the Soviet era, both geographically and in terms of time span, is a monument of Lenin. In Pyramiden, the sculptural portrait of Lenin is located as a fond motif in the long axis of this well-regulated city structure, and from the 1970s with the new Palace of Culture as a backdrop. Likewise, in Barentsburg the bust of Lenin is placed at the end of the main street axis. At both places this granite portrait is made in a socialist realist style. The facial features are part of a Soviet iconography picturing this first leader as a heroic visionary.<sup>34</sup> Lenin remained the “favourite subject for depiction” in Soviet art and visual culture all over the USSR, and new monuments were erected even in the decades after World War II.<sup>35</sup> For visitors to and amateur photographers at the Russian settlements on Svalbard, the Lenin busts have been one of the most popular motifs – and have now formed some of the “recycled” Soviet imagery for the tourist industry.<sup>36</sup> The bust in Pyramiden is often photographed from behind as part of a scenic view over this frozen Soviet urban outpost. The earliest known photographs from Barentsburg, taken by Herta Grøndal in 1957 or in the mid-1960s, show the Lenin bust with the hillside as a backdrop (Fig. 9). Later on, since 1974, it is Svalbard’s first multi-storey Khrushchevian residential building that has been framing the Lenin monument. In front of the building, there is a huge sign in Russian reminding both denizens and visitors that “our goal is communism.” Photographed during nearly seven decades, this Lenin monument in Barentsburg functions as a benchmark for changing contexts and different photographers’ perspective and modes of viewing (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9).

Another motif related to the Soviet visual culture, however not very frequently found in the archive, is the “Board of Honours”, which have been designed in quite different styles throughout the Soviet period (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11). The workers selected for this board were also listed in the newspaper published in the Soviet settlements (see Portsel 2020). The honorary wall in Grumant in the years around 1960 is in a classical Stalin style. The portraits of selected workers are presented symmetrically and hierarchically

<sup>33</sup> The lists of events when the Norwegians visited the Russians often included film screenings. Risanger 1978, 169, describes one of the films presented for the Norwegians during a visit in Barentsburg.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of socialist realism in Soviet aesthetics, see, for example, Groys 1993, 115–126.

<sup>35</sup> Edgar 2008, 181–184. See also a list of known Lenin statues at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_statues\\_of\\_Vladimir\\_Lenin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_statues_of_Vladimir_Lenin).

<sup>36</sup> For the significance of Soviet symbols in Barentsburg in the post-Soviet period, connected to contemporary tourism, see Kinossian and Gerlach 2016.

along the main street of Grumant (Fig. 10). The text in Cyrillic tells us: “We will bring about the victory of socialist labour”, and appeals to “comrade miners, builders and all polar explorers at the Grumant mine <to> fight for the achievement of the second-year targets of the seven-year plan”.<sup>37</sup> The boy on the tricycle in front of this fine-detailed wooden wall is setting the scene and taking these highly honored workers down to the quotidian level. The year after the picture was made, the settlement, which in the post-war period had actually been the largest village on Svalbard with up to 1200 inhabitants, became totally abandoned. The picture was taken by Carl A. Wendt, who with the same high contrasted black and white photo also depicted men in Grumant playing volleyball under the arctic sun.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1970s, the photographs witness an increase in propagandist visual culture. Colourful posters with emblems and linguistic signs are seen either in focus or as a backdrop in a great deal of photographs from this period. Signs with text in Cyrillic are exotic to the Norwegian photographers. In the picture from 1974 (Fig. 6) our attention is drawn directly to the emblematic symbols of communism: the star, the hammer, the sickle. Shot from behind, the photograph shows a group of Norwegians on their way to the Palace of Culture in Barentsburg. The person facing the photographer is obviously “the other”, a local inhabitant. Fig. 12 most likely depicts a covered walkway between the mine and the collective eatery in Barentsburg, but it is also a gateway filled with contemporary Soviet posters to communicate ideological messages both to the local inhabitants and to visitors from the West. Part of this propaganda culture must have looked a bit strange even to the inhabitants of Barentsburg, since the texts are about the programmatic realization of the “Five-year plan’s steps 1971–75”, including the increase of the average annual grain harvest on the Soviet mainland.<sup>39</sup> Other linguistic messages like the welcoming sign to Norwegian guests, and the well-known slogan “Miru mir” (peace to the world), written on the mountainside high above the Russian settlements, are however proclaiming friendly interaction with the Norwegians – as well as with the rest of the world.

The visual culture in Barentsburg and Pyramiden from the late 1950s to the late 1980s was in line with the official aesthetics of the Soviet regime. Even though comfortable working and living environment for the workers was a priority, “nevertheless, the symbolic dimension of the environment has been equally important”, as Kinossian and Gerlach claim (2016, 9). I would add that the photographic motifs – staged for the

<sup>37</sup> “The seven-year plan” was Khrushchev’s industrial and agricultural development plan running from 1959 to 1966.

<sup>38</sup> Wendt was a police officer in Longyearbyen, and thus close to the Governor. Wendt’s photographs from the Grumant City and Coles Bay are among the very few publicly available pictures which depict the inhabitants in these closely related settlements. Wendt later became Governor on Svalbard (1982–85). The photography of men playing volleyball in the Coles Bay is available in the Svalbard Museum’s photo collection, SVF22607.tif.

<sup>39</sup> The posters announce that during the five-year plan 1971–75 the grain harvest will reach 195 million tons in annual average. Another poster tells us of the expected growth in steel production, and a third, that the production of meat, milk, eggs and wool will increase by so much in 1975. There are no posters about mining, the most important industry in Svalbard – at least not in the scope of this picture.

photographers and tourists – may be considered representational of Soviet ideology, too. The cultural building frames various shows and other stage performances, additionally the modern sports hall with its richly decorated swimming pools, the museum, the kindergarten, the school. Furthermore, the greenery with vegetables and even flowers, and the barn with a variety of farm animals, which made the settlements nearly self-sufficient with regard to food, were presented to visitors, according to the existing photographs.<sup>40</sup> A smiling woman milking a cow in the barn of Barentsburg or feeding hens in the yard (Fig. 14), or a Norwegian visitor smelling a flower against the backdrop of Grønfjorden (Fig. 7)... Motifs like these, made into pictures, developed and printed, later on scanned and disseminated, have come to symbolize the good, collective and egalitarian Soviet life in this Arctic outpost. Considering the fact that most inhabitants in the Soviet settlements were better taken care of, at least when it comes to family life (with schools, kindergartens and hospitals) and cultural life (with sports halls, library, theatre, cinema and museum) than the Norwegian inhabitants by their companies Store Norske and Kings Bay, the symbolic power of these images from the Soviet side was strong. The representational power of these “propaganda” photographs has not been disputed.

The visual culture in the Soviet settlements also incorporated a folk craft tradition, according to the most extensive photographic material depicting Barentsburg. The decorative woodwork which covered the facades of the oldest concrete buildings from the mid-1970s is obviously referring to the vernacular architecture of the Russian North. The tiny chapel in Barentsburg, erected as a memorial *to the* 141 person who lost their lives in the *air crash* on the *Opera Mountain* in 1996, is one of the uttermost examples of this folk tradition. Murals and objects with lively figures and colours are pictured by photographers. In the 1960s, the buildings and their surroundings were decorated with international fairy tale figures like Pinocchio in the kindergarten, and with more specifically Russian – or Ukrainian – figures, such as the Matryoshka. In this case she is equipped with a mushroom umbrella, raised in the snow outside a building in Barentsburg. Some of these fairy tale motifs were replaced – or complemented – in the 1970s with new murals painted by one of the inhabitants. There are also photographs of narratives from old Russian and international fairy tales and legends, like *Snegurochka* (the Snow Maiden), *Ded Moroz* (Grandfather Frost) and the Snow Queen. There exist photographs of people in their fairy tale costumes, outdoors, in connection with the sports and cultural exchanges, and staged on the scene of the Palace of Culture in Barentsburg. All these figures from the Russian folklore and high culture can be found in the photographic series accompanied by portraits of Russian cultural icons, like the writers Alexander Pushkin and Maxim Gorky, and by heroes from and for the Soviet Union, first and foremost Marx and Lenin.

To this may also be added the colossal murals both on the exterior and the interior of the buildings in both Barentsburg and Pyramiden displaying for the contemporary eye conflicting visual cultures, e.g. scenes from fairy tales in a naive style, on the one hand, and more constructivist wall paintings and posters, on the other, like the one of Sputnik

<sup>40</sup> Barentsburgs historie: Norsk Polarinstituttts cruisehåndbok by Øystein Overrein (ed.), Jørn Henriksen, Bjørn Fossli Johansen and Kristin Prestvold.

in Pyramiden, probably photographed in the mid- or late 1960s (Fig. 13). Sent to outer space in October 1957, Sputnik 1 was the starting point for the so-called “space race” between the US and the Soviet Union, and a significant motif in the Cold War. The use of primary colours, dynamic lines and black contours gives the image a strong expression and a cartoon-like two-dimensionality. This socialist realist style also characterizes the posters on the public buildings from the 1970s and throughout the next decade, exemplified by a frequently photographed monument outside the first Pomor museum in Barentsburg, celebrating the coal mining industry (Kinossian and Gerlach 2016, 11). The imagery of Barentsburg is eclectic, putting together elements from different traditions and various specific historical moments in the period between the 1950s–70s.

According to Adrienne Edgar, the combination of official imagery with the USSR nations’ traditional and folkloristic visual culture is quite common in the visual culture of the Soviet Union: “The aspects of national culture vigorously promoted by the Soviets included folk arts such as handicrafts and folkloric dancing (...) These national cultures, however much they might differ from each other superficially, were all supposed to be infused with ‘Soviet’ or ‘Socialist’ ideology.”<sup>41</sup> The children with a communist flag, sheltered by a smiling Matryoshka outside a building in Barentsburg (Fig. 16), seem to be a good example of this infusion. Herta Grøndal, who has probably photographed this in the 1960s, has presented to us a colourful and child-friendly Soviet Arctic. However, the two children in the photograph become representative at the same ontological level as folkloric elements and Soviet symbols. In this case the children’s individuality is subsumed under the strong signs of Russian/Soviet culture, threatening to erase individual faces and make them *figurants* (Didi-Huberman 2009, 19). The signs in another picture of a couple of children refer to the realities of the modern era of the Cold War and technology. The red helicopter on the tundra is in the background, ready to take off, either as a friend or an enemy. The ambiguous meaning of the helicopter infects the reading of the two children snapped in the midst of their Arctic summer, underscored by the photographer’s distanced position.

Among the available digitized photographs from the Soviet settlements, there hardly exist any pictures from more private settings. The photograph of three persons around a table, probably shot in Barentsburg in the 1960s (Fig. 18a), may be an exception. The moment of the toast is depicted – *na zdorovje!* – with a bottle of vodka in front and an iron bed in the background. In the upper corner, the ideological father of the Soviet Union, Mr Marx, is present in a framed portrait. A comparison of this picture with another nearly identical one, taken shortly after (Fig. 18b), demonstrates the photographer’s gaze in a dual way. In the second picture, the photographer herself, Herta Grøndal, is placed at the table, leaning onto the embracing man in the middle. The picture is no longer a moment of absorption but clearly staged. The person behind the camera focuses on the visitor, and the moment of fraternization, while cropping the portrait of Marx, is given a prominent place in the photographer’s own composition in the room’s “holy corner”.<sup>42</sup> Significantly,

<sup>41</sup> Edgar in Kivelson and Neuberger (eds), 2008, 182. Most inhabitants in the Soviet settlements on Svalbard were – and still are – migrants from Ukraine.

<sup>42</sup> A place for religious icons, according to the Russian tradition.

there is also a version in colour, which means that the photographer changed back-ends from black and white to colour film, obviously finding this scene of importance. The interests of the photographer are revealed through angles, cropping, composition and a search for strange details or aesthetics. Grøndal is not only documenting, she is composing. The photographer's role as a distanced observer, a documentarian, is questioned.

The recordings from the official trips to Barentsburg and Pyramiden in the 1950s and 1960s are characterized by orchestrated groups of people and a mutual understanding of the reasons and rules for reciprocal visits on Svalbard. With the growth in the photographic culture in the 1960s and 1970s, the scope of the photographer widens to include more than just a close circuit of colleagues, friends and hosts. Further, the tourist recordings from the Soviet settlements focus on the icons of Soviet communist culture, on the strong visual symbols of emblematic nature, and/or on the socialist realist portraits of Soviet leaders. Most inhabitants of the Soviet settlements are depicted in connection with cultural and sports exchanges, consequently in leisure time activities. Or the inhabitants feature as exotic elements in a typical tourist motif (Fig. 6, Fig. 12).

All the pictures showing everyday activities are recorded by one and the same photographer, namely Herta Grøndal. She was invited inside, and took pictures of the work in the mine and in the kitchen, depicted the greenhouse, the cowshed, the library, the classroom and the kindergarten. Men, women and children are represented in a variety of contexts, as a kind of showcase for the egalitarian Soviet society. Grøndal's pictures frame objects and phenomena which are not part of an "official" Soviet iconography, but which, still, represent the Soviet people on Svalbard, both their "ideal" life and their actual world (see, for example, Fig. 1, 14, 15, 19, 21 and 22). This may very well correspond with the way the official authorities wished to represent themselves and the good collective life at an outpost of the Soviet Union. All in all, the photographs show the harmonious life in the (Soviet) Arctic.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, behind this more or less staged imagery of an ideal society, and of ideal Soviet citizens, some of Grøndal's photographs meet eyes and faces and reveal glimpses of individuality and living conditions, which avoid the control of society, politics and history.

### **Images activated**

Photographs are objects which may be destroyed and forgotten. Moreover, photographs are images which may be circulated, juxtaposed, superimposed and projected onto different contexts. Thus, the images can "take position", be active and actually change our comprehension of history and reality (Didi-Huberman 2016; see also Rancière 2018). Even if the photographs from the Soviet settlements, which I have rendered and described in this text, might seem quite ordinary, they give appearance to people, places and happenings and thus senses and bodies to histories of Svalbard which have not yet been told. Such an appearance is a necessary condition for constructing what Hannah Arendt calls "reality, a common world, or a world-in-common that unites us while it separates

<sup>43</sup> This goes just as well for Herta Grøndal's pictures of life in Longearbyen. See Haugdal 2017.

us.”<sup>44</sup> Probably this visual appearance was of special importance during the Cold War period on Svalbard, as people on both sides of the “border” took pictures of each other, printed and distributed them. This appearance also has value in another time in history.

To the contemporary viewer these images suddenly are digital and available on a screen in our own homes. Series and singular photographs, details, gestures, figures and settings are free to be put together in new assemblages before our eyes and in our minds. We should therefore ask what the meanings and functions of these historical images are. For sure, contemporary viewers come to these pictures with a different historical and cultural knowledge of “there and then”, of Svalbard in the 1950s–80s, and with a different ability to relate the motifs to real people and places. Do these photographs betray the truth of the Soviet settlements in the Cold War period? Do they confirm a preconceived idea of how life must have been, or do they challenge our understandings? Or, since the visitors’ photographic activity were strictly regulated in the Soviet settlements, do these pictures actually give a false representation of reality?

I have studied these pictures by conscientiously searching, systematizing, analysing and contextualizing groups of images and singular recordings, quite consistent with Roland Barthes’s (1981, 128) concept of *studium*, and tried to imbue the images with cultural, social or historical meaning by referring to a variety of sources. To ask what is *not* there in these large photo collections seems important. Written sources tell us there were accidents in the mine, hard work, homesickness, darkness, depression and death. However, nothing in the photographic material bear witness to such collective or personal tragedies. Comparing written sources, like the journalist Kjell Fjørtoft’s report on the Soviet prison camp in Coles Bay, and visual sources, like Herta Grøndal’s photography from the graveyard in Coles Bay (Fig. 25), gives tension to such lacunas in the archive.

Despite the fact that these photographs are singular images recorded in different situations and by different photographers, they invite us to read them as coherent representations of time, place and people. Didi-Huberman underscores how images work together in a *montage*, and how the *montage* represents truth, however fragmentarily.<sup>45</sup> Didi-Huberman claims that the connection between images is paradoxically “not between similarities, but between differences”, but he has faith in the visual form and the *montage* as a kind of knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Obviously, the *montage* disturbs my *studium* of these photographs as historical documentation. My search for narratives, plots and affiliations between motifs and written sources from the Soviet settlements – “the systematic plundering of the past in order to generate alliances between images” (Ionescu 2017, 1; see also Rancière 2004, 39) – brings forth this kind of *montage* of people, places and happenings on Svalbard in the Cold War years. The gaps or lacunas between the images

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958. Quoted in MacGregor 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Didi-Huberman 2009 with reference to the early Soviet film, e.g. Sergei Eisenstein, and later theorization on the concept of *montage* by Berthold Brecht and Walter Benjamin.

<sup>46</sup> Didi-Huberman, interviewed in December 2010 about the exhibition *Atlas*, based on the work of the German art historian and art theoretician Aby Warburg. See <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/multimedia/atlas-interview-georges-didi-huberman> (accessed 20 January 2019).



are filled in by the anticipation and the knowledge of the viewer. Such a reading process can be criticized as a false construction of there and then, or we may understand it more positively and pragmatically as *montage* making, and thus as acquisition of further knowledge.<sup>47</sup> This involves a productive relation between different temporalities and between places.<sup>48</sup>

Also, a singular image may present elements which distract the broad historical examination, the so-called *punctum* in Barthes's parlance. *Punctum* is a detail in a photographic picture which affects me as a viewer. It may be a detail which seems of no importance to the picture's main objective – like the librarian's shiny white pumps amongst dozens of well-ordered Communist books and Russian classics (Fig. 19); the nurse's arm (spookily duplicated in the painting on the wall) stretching out for the children under the artificial sun (Fig. 22); the straightening of the children's clothes while they are being photographed; and the brown pillows at the museum, on which the stuffed Arctic animals are arrayed (Fig. 23). These are elements within the image which hold our gaze without being reduced to mere meaning or to beauty; the simple details, however invested with the power to unsettle and subdue the cultural, social and historical reading of the entire image. These *puncta* may reveal to the contemporary viewer the signs that were out of the photographer's control. In addition, some of the photographer's compositional preferences, like cogent sections, hard cropping and wide angle, do affect our reading of the image in the same way, e.g. when Herta Grøndal intentionally incorporates the monumental portraits of Soviet cultural icons in the picture of a group of young girls (Fig. 15) or of a private meal (Fig. 18). Even more disrupting of “the order of the sensible”, to use Rancière's expression (2018, 12), are some pictures which disclose photography as compositions, like the wide-angle photography from the museum in Barentsburg shot during what probably was a film recording (Fig. 24). The staging of people and animals in this artificial room demonstrates clearly (and not without a touch of irony) that “an image is always a certain disposition of the visible. In a certain way, it has at its disposal the bodies that it represents; it occupies a certain place and exposes something there” (Rancière 2018, 12).

These words by Rancière underscore the double nature of photography as a documentation of something that really happened there and then, and as construction. Instead of claiming that photographs are “facts”, photographic images might be seen as sites of becoming and sites of the production of self and other. Thus, the photographs of people at work and leisure in the Soviet settlements on Svalbard are sources not for historians only, or for private and collective memory, but even for the imagination. “Most

<sup>47</sup> With reference to, respectively, Walter Benjamin and the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, interviewed in December 2010 about the exhibition *Atlas*, based on the work of the German art historian and theoretician Aby Warburg. See <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/multimedia/atlas-interview-georges-didi-huberman> (accessed 20 January 2019).

<sup>48</sup> As expressed by Roland Barthes (1977, 44): “The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing... but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then”.

striking to us”, Valerie E. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger write in their introduction to *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, “is a conspicuous predisposition (...) for the Russians to turn to the visual in order to summon a new reality into being, for them to use the experience of viewing as an engine of historical or eschatological transformation”. Kivelson and Neuberger (2008, 6) call this visual practice “seeing into being”.

The photographs from the Soviet settlements obviously make people (re-)appear and be remembered for the future. However, “it is thus not enough that people be exposed *in general*”, Didi-Huberman states (2009, 17): “one must go further and ask whether *in each case* the form of such an exposure – framing, montage, editing, rhythm, narration, and so on – encloses them (that is, alienates them and, finally, exposes them to disappearance) or whether it frees them (by exposing them to appear before us, giving them a power of appearance or apparition)”. In other words, we have to question how we comprehend these collections of images, together and individually, each separate image within its larger context.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Thanks to Sveinulf Hegstad at The Arctic University Museum, Herdis Lien at Svalbard Museum, and Eva Grøndal at Grøndal foto for permission to publish and access to high quality pictures.

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Fig. 1. Under the artificial sun during the dark season in Barentsburg, probably in the 1950s. Photo: Herta Grøndal (hereafter HG) / The Arctic University Museum of Norway – Herta Lampert photo collection (hereafter UM – Lampert), id: tsnf58453.



Fig. 2. Festivity in Barentsburg related to a sports exchange with the Norwegians, late 1950s or mid-1960s. Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf58423.



Fig. 3. Arrival at Pyramiden in 1956.

Photo: Erling Nødtvedt / Svalbard Museum, id: [SVE 08089.tif](#).



Fig. 4. Barentsburg in late 1950s or mid-1960s. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 5. In the Pyramiden harbour – with the cameras. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 6. Cultural exchange in Barentsburg, 1974.  
Photo: Bjørn H. Hallan / Facebook group “Gamle Svalbard”.



Fig. 7. At the greenery in Barentsburg, Summer 1971.  
Photo: Kjell Bjarne Sunde / Facebook, "Gamle Svalbard".



Fig. 8. "Kneeling in front of Lenin". Barentsburg, Spring 1973.  
Photo: Magne Ringdal Vollset / Facebook, "Gamle Svalbard".





Fig. 9. The Lenin monument in Barentsburg in 1957 (or 1966?). Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 10. Main street in Grumant, 1961 (or 1960?).  
Photo: Carl A. Wendt / Svalbard Museum, id: [SVF 12540.tif](https://www.svalbardmuseum.no/arkiv/SVF_12540.tif).



Fig. 11. Honour and glory for hard work, Pyramiden 1970s or 1990s.  
Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnd43019



Fig. 12. Barentsburg 1971. Photo: Kjell Bjarne Sunde / Facebook, "Gamle Svalbard".



Fig. 13. Building in Pyramiden,  
with a painting of Sputnik on the wall and imported green grass on the ground.  
Probably taken in the mid-or late 1960s. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 14. Woman with hens in Barentsburg.  
Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf58383.



Fig. 15. The reading room in Pyramiden,  
Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf58417.



Fig. 16. Barentsburg children. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 17. Children and a helicopter in Pyramiden in the 1960s. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 18a and 18b. Around the table – with Marx, probably in the mid-1960s.  
Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf58340 and id: tsnf58339.



Fig. 19. The Library in Pyramiden. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 20. Miners in Pyramiden. probably late 1960s. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 21. The Cultural Palace in Pyramiden, built in the early 1970s.  
Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf 58305.



Fig. 22. Kindergarden in Pyramiden, late 1950s or 1960s. Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.





Fig. 23. Pomor Museum in Barentsburg, probably in the 1960s.  
Photo: HG / Grøndal foto.



Fig. 24a and 24b. Posing at the Museum in Barentsburg in the 1970s.  
Photo: HG / Grøndal photo (colour) and HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnf 58404.



Fig. 25. Cemetery, Grumant, 1960s or 1970s. Photo: HG / UM – Lampert, id: tsnd41152.