

Storytelling and the Healing Power of Photography: Rita Leistner's *My Space* Project¹

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyze the artistic, social project titled *My Space. Stories from Inside the Downtown Eastside Vancouver*, created by Canadian photographer Rita Leistner. Through her photographs and interviews, the artist presents the everyday life of a group of drug and alcohol addicted residents of Astoria and Balmoral hotels. The article is based on photographs taken by Leistner and the statements of project participants – both acquired from the artist's Webpage. Bearing in mind Leistner's intentions, we tend to present her story in the storytelling narrative. We treat that approach as a useful tool for qualitative data analysis as well as insightful framework to represent a story. This approach has worked well so far in the study of culture and art. Thus, we focus on the content and a form of a story while uncovering its threads looking at it from different dimensions interpreted through the prism of individuals to whom the story relates. We look at the way in which the space occupied by the heroes of the story is being photographed by Leistner, who creates a medium allowing the narrative to connect the present with the past and the future. That medium plays an important role in building a community.

¹ The story recounted by Rita Leistner continues. More than a decade after the end of the project, there are still people in need of help in the DTES Vancouver area: the homeless, the addicted to alcohol and drugs, the sick. The authors of the article would like to dedicate it to The Heart Tattoo Society foundation, which has been providing meals to needy residents of the district at least once a week since the 2020 pandemic. Owing to the commitment and work of the volunteers of this Foundation, many people can get support not only in their struggle with everyday life, but also in the fight against addiction. See: The Heart Tattoo Society, n.d.



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Introduction

We immerse ourselves in the flow of many stories every day – these which we tell ourselves using various forms of expression and these which someone shares with us. We watch them, listen to them, experience them through movement, eye, sound, smell, or touch. Some open fantasy worlds, others draw disturbing visions of a possible past, present, and future. The list of heroes and plots is as limitless as the human imagination. Hence, there are stories about extraordinary and completely ordinary characters, about life-carrying ideas, numbers, and mathematical formulas, inhabited or empty buildings, clothes we wear, or concepts of good and evil. For us, as the authors of this article and – above all – researchers of culture, the most tender are stories showing what humanity is and how difficult it is to be a human being at these times. Stories about people who find themselves outside the social margin can easily turn into accusations, criticism, and a harsh assessment of their lives. But stories about a human being in crisis can also compassionately pose questions about their difficult situation and answer with sensitivity and empathy. One of them is the visual story called *My Space. Stories from Inside the Downtown Eastside Vancouver*², realized by Canadian photographer Rita Leistner in this major city of British Columbia in 2009. Through her photos and interviews, the artist, with interest and without judgmentalism, introduces the daily life of a group of drug and alcohol addicted residents

2 Project available on the artist's website: http://ritaleistner.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/myspace_byritaleistner.pdf (accessed: 3.04.2023).

of Astoria and Balmoral hotels. They were given rooms as a helping gesture for being a member of The Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). Lost and destroyed by drugs, they find these inferiors, notorious places to be a safe place to live (or survive) as well as, most of all, a community that gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance (Leistner, 2009).

In the presented text, we analyze photographs to understand how hotel rooms became the protagonists of life stories and a medium of narration linking the present with the past and the future (Striano, 2012).

Rita Leistner and her visual stories

The title character of our article, working mainly as a war photojournalist for over two decades, is an artist who describes, analyzes, and comments on the social and cultural reality, especially in times of crisis. Ever since she encountered Cornell Capa's concept of "concerned photographer" during her studies in New York in the late 1990s,³ she has been trying to illustrate in her projects the painful consequences of weaving an individual's life into a social, political, and cultural context. She takes photographs that – to Cornell Capa's idea – are not only supposed to be a testimony, but can also serve broadly educational purposes and trigger social changes. Therefore, Rita Leistner is an artist closely seeking and observing the essence of humanity by showing difficult social reality in a way to contribute to a wider public discussion. She looks for niche stories that usually do not attract other reporters (Leistner, n.d.). The photographic narrative she creates – balancing on the verge of participant observation and impartial artistic creation – can be interpreted in the context of sociology and visual anthropology. Rita Leistner's photographs and the texts that complement them can be successfully treated as a visual description of the life of a specific, albeit temporary, community (Tomanek, Kukielko-Rogozinińska, 2016; Kukielko-Rogozinińska, Tomanek, 2017; Kukielko-Rogozinińska, 2021). Obviously, a question on the "historical truth" and "reality" of the characters arises. Collecting visual material, often a basis of ethnographic research, goes hand in hand with a necessity to interfere in the existing social order. Interactions with people and the environment are unavoidable. The existence of the researcher, among the others, equals breathing, looking, moving, participating in conversations, all of which evokes certain behaviors of the people involved in the study (Jeziorski, 2011).

Storytelling as a method of analysis and interpretation

Rita Leistner tells her stories through storytelling, a common-sense understanding of which seems quite obvious. In the simplest words, storytelling is the ability to tell a story. However, when we look at it closely, we notice that it is also something much more complex. It consists of certain narrative

3 Cornell Capa (1918–2008), Robert's younger brother, founder of International Center of Photography, chose the phrase "concerned photographer" to describe those creators who exhibit humanism in their work and use their photos to educate and change the world, not just to record it (Williams, 2008).

elements, has its own heroes, a narrator, a specific structure and procedures aimed at evoking specific reactions of recipients (Abell, 2004; Campbell, 2008; Murdock, 2013). As a skill, it is rooted in various socio-cultural contexts used in intertextuality, and as a deepest resource of values, ideas, axionormative orders, prejudices or references to other stories (Bernstein, 1986; Muszyńska, 2011). Some storytelling strategies are dominated by a linear narrative suggesting the events presented in succession are related by a cause-and-effect relationship. This procedure is the result of the compositional structure of the story. In more complex narrative structures, we encounter multi-threaded non-linear narratives. These ones use the idea of sequential events, and invite the viewer to play with the unconventional composition. The watcher reconstructs the story by discovering the hidden composition of events that are presented in unusual order (Ostaszewski, 2007). Storytelling can also be a tool shaping the social environment (e.g. a tool used to create a community), a method used to influence receivers' viewpoints or manage their attention (marketing or persuasive activities), a diagnostic frame allowing to understand the community and their problems (Maier, 2008; Polletta et al., 2011; Liu, Xing, Starik, 2012; Gelman, Basbøll, 2014; Tenore, 2017; McCall et al., 2021). In this research, we take storytelling as a method to look into qualitative social phenomena, culture, and art. The bucket full of storytelling techniques draws knowledge from many fields being situated at the intersection of sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and literary studies. We use this method to deconstruct and reconstruct ideas, events, and social and cultural phenomena presented by Rita Leistner in her photographs. When learning about the stories recalled by Rita Leistner, we focus on time and place where story takes place; outline plot threads and an attempt to read the meanings and values that stand behind the referenced images.

Storytelling – a sociology approach

The most obvious example of a story sociologists gather is the interview (an in-depth, biographical, or focus-group-interview). Individual in-depth interviews and biographical interviews are essentially based on storytelling. In IDI (In-Depth Interviews), the researcher meets the protagonist face-to-face while building an intimate atmosphere for the conversation. This creates a space where honesty, openness, and trust allow the story to develop. The narrative then may reveal emotions, reflections, confessions that might become a basis for further discovery of the axionormative order of the community. Integrated within the plot patterns, the elements of the story allow to recognize the cultural context in which the author of the story is rooted (Mitosek, 2011). Deconstructing a story by paying attention to the way it is told shows the way it is legitimized (Dennett, 2020). In turn, focusing on the complexity and specificity of the language used by a storyteller ends with better understanding of dynamics of the cultural reproduction or the intergenerational transmission of language codes and values (Bernstein, 1986). Although storytelling is often viewed as “suspect” in science, scientific messages built on the narrative patterns offered by storytellers are better received than scientific reports without no narrative elements but based only on data (Green, 2006). Non-scientific narratives (e.g. media narratives, some marketing stories) are inherently persuasive, as they usually describe someone's experiences in a way to convince us toward a particular perspective. Such narratives are released

from the necessity to justify the truthfulness of their claims, because the story itself legitimizes the truthfulness of events. Similarly, the structure of a linear narrative often suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between events that occur one after another. Even if that relation is not being expressed directly, it may lead a watcher to an “inevitable” conclusion about the causality at hand (Curtis, 1994). This apparent inevitability to which narrative leads, coupled with the lack of a need to justify the story, is the main element supporting the normative dimension of the story (the storytellers’ definition of right and wrong does not necessitate justifying these statements, as it is the story itself that plays that role) (Graesser, Ottati, 1995). Since narratives can assign concrete values to real-world objects without any justification, they legitimize themselves, which is a persuasive mechanism *per se*. Sociologists examine the persuasive side of narratives by asking: how does the audience accept the normative nature of narration and what mechanisms facilitate such persuasion effectively? (Slater, Rouner, 2002).

In this article, we would like to focus on the form of the story that combines threads from many dimensions of a life of a person. We focus on the photographs presented online by Rita Leistner. The material shows hotel rooms and its habitants’ utterances which become a medium of narration connecting the present (when the photographs were taken) with the past (the history of habitants with their experiences mentioned roughly in our work and more broadly in Rita Leistner’s original description (Leistner, 2009)). But, above all, they serve to build a sense of community among those living in hotels and described in *My Space*. In addition to the photographs taken as a part of the project, we also quote personal statements from the residents of both hotels (their authors usually signed only their first name).

The *My Space* project

The initiator of the *My Space* project is Julia Wilson. She is a graduate in communications at the Canadian Simon Fraser University, who listened and collected the oral stories of residents of the Downtown Eastside district in Vancouver (DTES). The stories were the subject of her Master’s thesis titled *My Voice, My Space, Our Community: A Vancouver DTES Community Action Project* (Wilson, 2009). As one of the oldest districts of the city (sometimes called its historic heart), it has for years been inhabited by outsiders, people with the lowest incomes, the unemployed and the homeless, who require constant support from social services. Many of them struggle with the problem of drug and alcohol addiction. The DTES is also known for having, the crime rate on higher level than other parts of the city (City of Vancouver, n.d.).

The interviews conducted for the MA thesis inspired the creation of the *My Space* art project in 2009. The main goal now was to capture the personal stories of the DTES residents, which otherwise – extremely moving and inspiring – would never have been available to a wider audience. Photographs and accompanying comments allow us to look at the inhabitants of this district as if “from within”. We see their lives in community that offers help and support regardless of health condition, addiction advancement, or wealth. Bud Osbourne, the founder of this organization, says:

When I first got here [...] I didn't know what a family was, what a community was, what really being alive was. I kept hearing this is a community so I started researching, community, what is community, and I saw that this area has characteristics of community which is traditional and rare really. It's a community of primarily low-income people, many of whom are very ill and yet the spirituality is powerful here. [...] If you're here honestly, well you are very welcome (Leistner, 2009: 8).

The main project participants are members of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU, n.d.). It is one of the largest (over 2,000 members) and oldest drug user organizations in the world. It was established in the late 1990s, at a time when overdoses and HIV infections were so frequent in the DTES that it was officially declared a public health emergency. The goal of the VANDU is to improve the lives of people who use illegal substances as well as to support those who have managed to recover from addiction (VANDU, n.d.). As Osbourne continues:

I would have never believed as a lone junkie that VANDU [...] would become an organization that has come together and accomplished important things. But when we came together, to see this transformation, to see people saying "I am somebody, I am important, I am not a piece of shit that should be locked up, that everybody hates – I'm worthless," which is the message that's constantly pounded in, but to see people come alive and realize that maybe we can actually change something and be of help here; that was beautiful to see, just to see the enthusiastic expressions in the faces [...]. It was a really emotional and powerful feeling; it was a powerful time. We can finally change something (Leistner, 2009: 8).

Canadian photographer Rita Leistner was asked to design and run the project. She hoped to be responsible for its visual side and interviews with the DTES residents. Commenting that situation, she wrote:

I never know what I will photograph until I get there. The only thing I knew when I came to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (DTES) was that I had no interest in making more pictures of what I'd already seen photographed many times. I spent three weeks talking to DTES residents before I took a photograph. I resolved early-on not to take any street photography, and not to photograph anyone using drugs. Based on conversations I had, my focus became people in their own spaces (Leistner, 2009: 64).

It was the way Rita Leistner conducted interviews that became one of the stimuli that triggered emotions and led interviewees to reveal the stories about the inhabitants and their lives in the DTES. This was done by setting stories (interviews) in a specific time and place. It helped in identifying the problems faced by the participants of the project (Leistner, 2009). It was an important commitment that they have undertaken, as they shared willingness to go to rehab; they have changed their attitudes and emotions leading to a change in their life (Morgan, Dennehy, 1997). Fern, one of the interviewed residents of the hotels, indicates this in her statement:

Now I don't have a job, I'm on welfare, I'm living in a shitty hotel. I work around drug addicts, I work at the safe injection site, I have been there for over four years as a peer support worker. Some clients that come in, they get upset and they tend to cry in front of me, especially the ladies. The stories I hear there are similar to what I went through. You know, being alone (Leistner, 2009: 36).

After the first talks took place, Rita Leistner understood that the main respondents' need is to express their belonging to a community, the existence of which is not noticed beyond the boundaries of the district. Therefore, the idea was to create a comprehensive and representative image of the DTES residents, which would be an authentic description of the community of individuals struggling with life problems (Wilson, 2009).

Eventually, the artist took pictures of her interlocutors in their rooms in the Astoria and Balmoral hotels. Both places, located in historically attractive buildings, are avoided by tourists visiting Vancouver due to the danger lurking in this district in this neighborhood for strangers.⁴ The VANDU members can, however, rent rooms there using money support obtained from the social welfare. As a rule, it is the only chance for them to avoid living on the street. Gary talks about it in his interview: "It's nice having my own little space that I can go to be by myself and shut the world out." (Leistner, 2009: 4).

These dirty, devastated rooms become their own, private space, often the first in years. The photographer captured the emptiness of the interiors and rough views from the outside the windows. This move allows the audience to make a connection to how the everyday life of the people who live there looks like. This is mentioned by Derek, a former resident of the hotel, who works as a volunteer in the district:

In a lot of ways, the Downtown Eastside resembles the place where I grew up. All the stuff that happens around me has a lot to do with how I grew up too: The violence, the drinking, the drug use, people getting raped. Somehow I needed to move away from that too. But working at Sweet Grass [Native Support Centre – authors] is opening up a door. And that's the thing when you work at healing people: Really there's nothing you can do until they ask for help – and then you can help a person heal (Leistner, 2009: 50).

An invitation to this story is the self-portrait of Rita Leistner (Photo 1).⁵ The artist used a mirror in one of the hotel's bathrooms. It is an intimate, personal room like a bedroom, but at the same time one that one would make available to visiting guests. We do not know if Rita Leistner has just walked in or is about to leave, since she is wearing a jacket and cap, or if the room temperature is such that she requires warmer clothes. Photography is symbolic for at least two reasons. It shows a fragment of

4 At the beginning of 2022, due to the threat to the life and health of residents, the Vancouver authorities decided to demolish the building where the Balmoral hotel was located (Britten, 2022).

5 The titles of the photographs are suggested by the authors of the article.

the everyday life of one of the residents (probably a man, as indicated by the cosmetics on the shelf), and at the same time is an expression of trust in the photographer who was allowed to walk into this personal space.

Photo 1. Self-portrait



Pictures and words

When constructing her stories, Rita Leistner primarily uses images, which are usually accompanied by a short text (a statement of the protagonist or a commentary by the photographer). The artist willingly describes the photographs she has taken, outlining the social and cultural context of their creation. In the *My Space* project, however, she avoids author's comments and gives the voice to its heroes. The photos of the space were juxtaposed with the statements of the VANDU members who shared their biographies marked by addiction and loneliness during interviews. Therefore, we are dealing here with a multi-threaded story that can be read in many ways. On the one hand, we can simply follow the path of Rita Leistner's visual storytelling into which the individual stories of her respondents are interwoven. On the other hand, we can interact with photographs, treated as a work of art (photographs carry an artistic value) and at the same time as a medium (carrier of a story) depicting the physical living space of the characters. However, it is not a linear story. The photos placed in the post-project publication can be viewed in any

order. Below each of them there are statements from the residents or Rita Leistner's observations. However, we are not sure who exactly is in the picture and whose room we are viewing. It is an interesting procedure that allows the recipients to learn about these inaccessible spaces and the stories of their inhabitants without judging them and assigning (usually harmful) labels. Moreover, the artist invited the inhabitants of the presented hotels to an accompanying project vernissage. Photos from this event were also published in a publication (Photo 2). We are dealing here, therefore, with a kind of meta-narrative: we see the heroes of the photographs looking at the photographs of which they are heroes.

Photo 2. It's me!



Some People don't like having their picture taken – they think it's taking their spirit or something. But people down here kind of enjoy it – so that people from the outside can find out how they're living. It's a lot better than what you see on T.V. This shows people how they are, in their rooms and stuff, their homes [Marvin – hotel resident – authors] (Leistner, 2009: 63).

The presence of the photographer (as we can guess from the condition of the rooms captured in the photos) did not make any changes in the space in which the interviews took place. The rooms where respondents live seem to be in the state they are in on a daily basis. They were not specially arranged, cleaned, or refreshed due to Rita Leistner's visit (Photo 3). The photos show rubbish,

packaging, wrappings in the rooms – just thrown on the floor, crumpled clothes, food scraps. They can be treated as an element of taming space, making it “one’s own,” marking one’s presence. They are dominated by realism.

Photo 3. My small but own space



This aspect of the artist’s trust among hotel residents allows us to get to know their environment in its original, unchanged form. Interviews conducted in this everyday, intimate, and therefore safe atmosphere allow one to look through Rita Leistner’s camera at the world inside the VANDU community. It was an interesting experience for both parties, as Gary recalls:

At first I thought, oh, just another photographer... I’m surprised at the quality of the photographs and the subject matter. They show the positive sides of people’s lives. It really impressed me. I like seeing my own picture, but I also like seeing how other people down here live, and you [Rita Leistner – authors] show a great deal of that. Seeing everyone else down here. I enjoy seeing how my friends are living down here. We’ve been friends [Marvin and I – author] for five years, and we’ve never seen each other’s rooms. It turned out a lot better than I thought it would (Leistner, 2009: 63).

Interestingly, most of the photos show the interior of the rooms in such a way that one can see what is happening outside their window. The windowsill, the door frame is only a symbolic border between living in the building and returning to the street. In one of the photos, we can see a pastel curtain, decorated with floral motifs, taking up most of the frame (Photo 4). The almost warm and family atmosphere that this curtain brings to the room clearly contrasts with the reality outside the window. This reality is empty, there are no people in it, it is cold and impersonal, because there are only objects in it (cars, road signs and signs for pedestrians, lines defining how to cross the street).

Photo 4. The curtain and the outside world



The curtain protects against daylight, but is also a gate, a rock, a wall protecting against the world beyond its own space (hotel room). However, it can also protect the outside world from what happens inside the hotel and the people who live in it. The way the curtain is placed on the window allows one to see only a small fragment of the world visible behind the glass. It is a post-modern brick-and-steel city, there are no pedestrians on the sidewalks, and the streets are full of steel constructs, neon lights, and vehicles furtively passing by. There is no one who would try to look into the room from the outside. No one would like to do this. This strong line between the outside and the inside is noticed by Fern:

I would like to get out of this area but all my work is down here. I volunteer and run groups. I work. All of that's down here. All of the friends that I've made down here. A lot of people I'm friends with I could go up and share anything. My healing circles I do. I never went to residential school but I was abused by two of my half brothers. I started drinking at twelve years old, [...]. That was my way of forgetting everything I went through as a young girl. I hid that for years and years because of my half brothers. I had nobody to talk to. I shared a lot of things in that group that I wouldn't have told my own family. We just let go of things that we keep in and open up and you're not ashamed of crying front of people you don't know. Being able to talk openly and have people just sit there and listen (Leistner, 2009: 37).

In another shot, we see a room and a window, with a torn curtain wrapped around a steel railing, scraped here and there. This time we see a much larger part of the city (Photo 5).

Photo 5. The neighborhood



The frame is dominated by two adjacent, low-class hotels and an advertisement for a building for sale resembling a two-story warehouse. Part of the frame is filled with a gravel roof, which could be accessed, because it tempts with the possibility of an unusual walk. However, this intention is protected by a barrier – a steel mesh present just outside the window. The surroundings seen outside the

window, in which the eyes are attracted by rubbish and the mess, are also discouraging to the idea of a walk. There are no passers-by here either. The most important part of life takes place inside the hotel, as Rick A. says:

I consider these people around here more like my family more than my own family. Because I was raised here, I lived with these people, like some of these people that moved here lived here for 15 years. Some of them are still here. I know so many people. It's my little home (Leistner, 2009: 27).

In the next photo, the city reveals a huge spacewalk roof in front of us, which seems to be a walking area with already worn paths (Photo 6). This view breaks down associations other than the previous ones. The sky and greenery give a sense of freedom that is not associated with a closed hotel space.

Photo 6. Close to freedom



The Spacewalk teems with the already fading but still lush green lawn. This green is fading here and there. The space we see outside the window seems dirty, because we look at it through the dirty glass dripping with moisture. This seemingly repulsive room – dirty, damp and neglected – becomes a place of renewal. A refuge. With great potential for going outside. Homelessness is a painful experience, as Fern mentions:

It was the most depressing time of my life, being homeless. I had nobody. I was all by myself. I had friends down here but they were doing the same thing I was. The only time someone would come visit me was when I was smoking crack in my room (Leistner, 2009: 36).

The therapeutic dimension of the *My Space* project is also important. The very initiative that led to its implementation became a stimulus that positively activates the characters appearing in it. They themselves declared their willingness to change and develop. It is significant to Lucie:

I wanted to tell you that I'm going to rehab. [Being a part of this project – author] has given me the courage to believe I deserve to get clean (Leistner, 2009: 5).

The interest in their lives and the desire to record the quoted biographies made the inhabitants of the DTES reflect. Honest conversations and confessions strengthened their thoughts, gave vent to their emotions, and strengthened their belief that their life matters, that it is an important story worth presenting to a wider audience. However, it should be mentioned that not all project participants are clean (meaning that they do not use drugs, do not abuse alcohol). Some of them have made the decision that they have to make. Some are still considering rehab and changing their way of functioning. One person who talks about the way of change is Rose:

It's just hard I feel like I have so many gifts and talents. And I feel like I just kind of threw them down the drain. I have little glimpses of them. It's awesome cause I know the potential I do have... did have – cause I know it's there. Yeah, I would go for rehab, but you have to want it. But maybe I don't really want rehab. Even though it would be the best thing for me. I still got my skills and I still got my talents – I still got my big bright ideas. Like I said I get glimpses of them so I know its gonna be there but for how long? For every talent it doesn't just go away – just cause you fuck it up right? I just gotta get my motivation back and my patience (Leistner, 2009: 52).

This transformational function is also performed by the feeling of belonging to a community, realizing that we have someone, we are not alone. The warm gaze and smile that the woman sitting on the bed gives the protagonist while looking at the lens may prove that a bond exists between them (Photo 7). Perhaps it is based on different grounds than the previous accounts mentioned by hotel residents (before that, they were temporarily linked to only the possession of drugs or alcohol, which they could use together. When the drugs stopped, the relationships also ended). There is no feeling of shame in this story about addiction, one's appearance, or the state of the room in which to live. There is understanding based on similar past and present experiences.

Photo 7. We're in this together



The stories and emotions interviewees share very often show ambivalence. They are grateful for the chance they have – a new life path they can choose. In order to get the check that allows you to rent a room, one does not need to be clean of drugs and alcohol. Furthermore, one can still dream, imagine “I am not attached to this place.” So, they can dream and plan to leave this place one day. These are painful dilemmas, because the decision to move often means that you will part with your real friends and new family that you met at the DTES. As Paul says:

I have been in the Downtown Eastside for five years and I feel I am part of the community but I'm just not using drugs. I have a great rapport with so many people. I have a bond with people, I have been there and they trust me. You have to think outside of the box to help some people to go to meetings and apply for benefits. You have to take the people by the hand and help them get their stuff together. The dope-sick people need a lot of help. It's part of the bonding process with the people. Everyone does their own thing and that's ok. I just want to help people that are down-and-out. I blew my life and survived being drug free – I'm a good and bad example. The odds were stacked against me but I did it and am living proof it can be done. The odds are slim but it can be done (Leistner, 2009: 20).

Conclusion

The *My Space* project is an example of a visual story that becomes much more complex than photographing specific people, places, and events.

In this article, we have tried to show that storytelling is a multi-threaded idea. In our opinion, it is a method that allows for the construction and reconstruction of stories based on visual and narrative material (interviews). It is also a technique that enables the accumulation of knowledge about the life, emotions, plans, and reflections of individuals and the community on the verge of a life crisis. The task of the narrator, or the companion of the story – in this case Rita Leistner – is to reach the reflections and individual stories of the characters through skillful narration so that it becomes easier to compare human stories. Conducting interviews and photographic documentation of people's stories additionally provides valuable (also therapeutically) research material. We have presented storytelling in a form that helps to look more broadly and understand the fulfilled and unfulfilled needs of people on whom society has given up. These expectations and lost life chances, captured by Rita Leistner in interviews and photographs, show that – apart from a method – storytelling also becomes a social tool, sensitizing to human needs and the existential pain resulting from disappointed expectations. Storytelling involving both an interview and a visual material is a technique that allows for a more holistic and fuller understanding of the story told about a community or group that is subject to sociological analysis.

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Storytelling i uzdrawiająca moc fotografii: projekt *My Space* Rity Leistner

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest analiza artystyczno-społecznego projektu *My Space. Stories from Inside the Downtown Eastside Vancouver* kanadyjskiej fotografi Rity Leistner. Artystka poprzez swoje fotografie i wywiady przybliży codzienność grupy uzależnionych od narkotyków i alkoholu mieszkańców hoteli Astoria i Balmoral. Artykuł opiera się na fotografiach z projektu *My Space* oraz wypowiedziach jego uczestników. Mając na uwadze intencje twórczyni, autorzy artykułu przedstawili go w kontekście storytellingu, który potraktowali jako użyteczne narzędzie jakościowej analizy zjawisk społecznych. Podejście to sprawdza się przede wszystkim w badaniu zjawisk kultury i sztuki, a zwłaszcza różnego rodzaju wytworów artystycznych. W opracowaniu skupiono się na formie opowieści, która łączy w sobie wątki z wielu wymiarów indywidualnego i społecznego życia jednostki. Pokazano, jak fotografie przestrzeni, w której mieszkają bohaterowie opowieści, mogą stać się medium narracji łączącej teraźniejszość z przeszłością i przyszłością, a przede wszystkim służyć budowaniu społecznej wspólnoty.

Słowa kluczowe: Rita Leistner, fotografia, storytelling, opowieść wizualna, budowanie wspólnoty