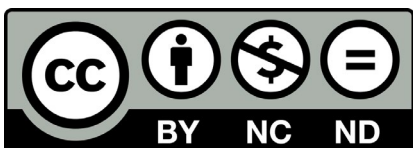


## Artikkeli I

Luostarinen, N., & Hautio M. (2019). Play(e)scapes: Stimulation of adult play through art-based action. *The International Journal of New Media, Technology and the Arts* 14(3), 25–52. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9987/CGP/v14i03/25-52>





VOLUME 14 ISSUE 3

The International Journal of

# New Media, Technology and the Arts

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## Play(e)scapes

Stimulation of Adult Play through Art-based Action

NINA LUOSTARINEN AND MINNA HAUTIO



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**THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
NEW MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS**

<https://artsinsociety.com>  
ISSN: 2326-9987 (Print)  
ISSN: 2327-1787 (Online)  
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9987/CGP> (Journal)

First published by Common Ground Research Networks in 2019  
University of Illinois Research Park  
2001 South First Street, Suite 202  
Champaign, IL 61820 USA  
Ph: +1-217-328-0405  
<https://cgnetworks.org>

*The International Journal of New Media, Technology and the Arts*  
is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.

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# Play(e)scapes: Stimulation of Adult Play through Art-based Action

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*Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine whether adults' play can be stimulated using art-based exercises. It is based on an experiment in which people were asked to make visual reinterpretations of artworks of their choice while visiting a forest or other natural environment. The key concept was to encourage participants to experience play inspired by the artworks, specifically on the terms of, and in interaction with, the location. Participants were further encouraged to share their experience with others by uploading a picture to a website. The results show that playing really did take place in the natural settings. The pictures show clear signs of adults surrendering to play and proof of use of playthings. Hence it looks as if adults' play may be stimulated using art-based exercises and that adult players make astonishingly multidimensional and deeply meaningful picture interpretations as long as they are given a good reason to do so and the freedom to throw themselves into action. Giving permission to act differently, the permission to free oneself from familiar operating models was encouragement enough, and the forest suddenly acquired new experiential, functional, multi-sensory purposes which crossed the boundary of normality.*

*Keywords: Play, Place Attachment, Art-based Research, Interpretation, Photoplay, Forest Relation, Participatory Art*

## Introduction

This paper is based on an experiment in which people were supplied with artworks, then given the task of building visual reinterpretations in a natural environment. The premise was to get participants to play, inspired by the artworks and on the terms of, and in interaction with, the location. The experiment “Mätäsметäs” was conducted in Finland in 2014. The experiment was used to answer the question of whether adults' play could be stimulated using art-based exercises. The basic idea is based on the manifesto presented in Katriina Heljakka's doctoral thesis (2013), which maintains that adults also have the right to play. Studies have shown that play has positive effects on well-being (Barnett and Storm 2009; Goldstein 2012; Tonkin and Whitaker 2019), and for that reason, adults should also have the right to give themselves up to playing and to use playthings as part of their work and leisure without feeling guilty. In the case we studied, the activities called “play” could be classified as “pictorial play,” in which mental visualization extends new meanings to the roles or objects through pictorialization. The space in which the play takes place also acquires new meaning through the window opened by both the pictorializing and play.

Mätäsметäs is methodologically inclined toward socially engaged arts (SEA) (Kwon 2002; Froggett et al. 2011; Lacy 1995; Yang 2015; Schrag 2018). But we call it an *art-based participatory activity*. We also see our role as facilitators of play rather than actual SEA artists (Johanson and Glow 2018). The activity has a social dimension, but is suitable for introvert and solo playing as well, not performative or actively social which, according to Pritchard (2016), is often distinctive for socially engaged art practices. In the Mätäsметäs method, the social dimension is reached by sharing the images in an online community, but the act also lends itself to solo, reflective, and slow-tempo playing and reclusive participation. It has, however, some pivotal traits of SEA. These include involving people as medium or material (Tate, n.d.),

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engaging with culture (Lacy 1995), immersive experiences (Froggett et al. 2011), site-specificity (Kwon 2002), and an aim toward new understanding for the participants (Schlemmer 2016).

At the time of releasing *Mätäsmetäs* (April 2014), the idea of reinterpreting fine art was an upcoming trend. Only two weeks later, Europeana Creative (n.d.) released *vangoyourself.com* with the purpose of recreating a classical painting from the collections of European museums. The most distinctive difference between these two was that in *VanGoYourself* the purpose was to mimic the original artworks whereas in *Mätäsmetäs* the purpose was to reinterpret the artworks more freely and creatively. The *#venusofberlin* campaign of *Gemäldegalerie* (n.d.) in 2015 is also a project that encourages these kind of activities. At the same time, several other socially engaged art projects using playing as a method were taking place. These included *Too Much Melanin* from 2013, *The Builders* 2011, and *Playdate* 2015 (Sole 2017). All of these projects required performative participation whereas *Mätäsmetäs*, *VanGoYourself* and *#venusofberlin* could be played even in solitude.

### Play, Art, Places—Art Play Places

In our research focus, art and play come together. Play and art do indeed have much in common—play can even be considered a kind of “undeveloped art production” (Hirn 1918). Play is about a kind of basic quality of human activity, the need to do all sorts of apparently unnecessary things and to engross oneself in matters which are not of this world (cf. Huizinga 1938). Art has the same sort of properties. Descriptions of the properties of both play and artistic concepts fall for the most part into the domain of aesthetics (Huizinga 1984). According to Ellen Dissanayake (1974), art even originates in a form of play, from which it has, over the millennia, developed into an independent form of its own.

Both art and play require imagination, encounter surprises and unpredictability, and provide rewards. They also have fantasy, illusion, and imagination in common. The characteristics of investigation and curiosity in both art and play are the building blocks for creativity and innovation (Dissanayake 1974, 2000). In addition, both activities produce deeply immersive experiences for the people who do them (Csíkszentmihályi 2005). The flow of play originates when the players share the reality of play and the players meld into one (Sava and Katainen 2004).

There are many theories of play. One common factor, however, binds a large proportion of them to each other: that of the imaginary or make-believe. Different researchers use different terms for the imaginary element of play. These include make-believe play, pretend play, imaginary play, fantasy play, and roleplay. The terms differ from each other, for the most part, in whether imaginary play is understood solely as the player assuming a role or as a broader concept of play which includes imagination (Lagercrantz and Patteri 2018).

According to Lev Vygotsky (1978), play is an activity done in an imaginary situation and in which unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play. Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio (1932) defines play as an illusion to whose power the player willingly submits (Helenius 2004). Johan Huizinga (1949) notes that the word illusion is derived from the Latin *ludere*, to play. According to him, illusion means to play with senses and the mind. It refers to an ostensible observation or understanding which is only true in one’s thoughts.

In play, the boundaries of normal reality are broken. In play, the attitude to be adopted, which relativizes and interprets reality anew, is a conscious choice of the player (Riikonen 2013). Indeed, a basis on agreement is central to play (Piironen 2004). When playing, the player suspends belief, sets criticism aside, and consents to sacrificing realism and logic for the sake of enjoyment. Indeed, the “unreal” is a fundamental quality of play (Hein 1968). Logic reminds us of surrealism, which, according to Timo Kaitaro (2015), produces exceptions to the expected by relying on existing, established meanings. Something completely new is placed in a location where there is usually something familiar. This combination shakes up our thinking and forces us to think in a new way (Kaitaro 2015).

Riitta Hänninen (2003) notes that play has its own identifiable world and structure, which also has a defined time and place. According to her, play receives its essence, that is, its identity, in the play event which the player and the form of play bring about jointly. The play location, for its part, is born of the relationship between play and space (Granö 2004). Play helps the players to create something new out of their experiences and to make them visible. Thus, play is also communication and even a way to re-find lost communication methods (Bernier 2005). When a space controlled by the person himself or herself is in question, playing with “me” roles may even be a creative opportunity for self-development (Sava and Katainen 2004).

Real and imagined playthings are often associated with play. There are three types of playthings. A plaything does not always exist as a physical object, but can be imagined as something very physical. On the other hand, a replacement object to which the imagination gives additional properties may also function as a plaything. For example, a stick may be imagined as a horse, and it functions as a prompter of play (Juel Larsen 2015). An essential element of the use of playthings is their ability to bear the ideas and meanings which they are given. Not any object can be a replacement object; rather, the object must act sufficiently functionally and believably in play to be able to replace its original purpose (Vygotsky 2016). The player himself or herself may also turn into a plaything by assuming various qualities. Thus, he or she may turn into a bear, for example (Juel Larsen 2015).

Riikonen (2013) points out how several researchers of play have emphasized that a special time and place, one that is separate from the rest of reality, is always associated with play. These boundaries set play apart from normal life and the normal rules of communities cease to function in these special conditions. For that reason, the permission of social roles and modes of behavior that are normally unwelcome or suppressed are possible in the world of play (Riikonen 2013). Huizinga (1984) speaks about magic circles in which play occurs. He states that in the circles of the ordinary world there are momentary worlds, stages of activity that are closed in on themselves. A magic circle is a play space in which the player creates an imaginary world, one that follows rules, alongside the real world (Tujula 2017).

According to Lasse Juel Larsen (2015), the make-believe of play expresses itself as two separate but interacting levels (spatial dyad). The first level concerns the real, physical location of play, which can include playthings. The second level consists of the meaningful content of the activity. Without this augmented content, play does not occur. This other essential element of play, its immaterial spiritual structure, makes it possible for play to be something more than a mere function.

Play locations create and carry meaning, including subsequent memories (Granö 2004). In this way, playing also attaches the player to the place. According to Carmen Hidalgo and Bernardo Hernández (2001), attachment to a place means an emotional connection between the person and place, which also includes the emotions related to the place and the meanings achieved by the place. Anne-Mari Forss (2007) notes that emotions are a part of aesthetic sensitivity, and they are formed on the basis of beliefs formed by mental images, among other things. An emotional experience in a place may also be more momentary and atmospheric. Atmospheric elements may be the historical dimension, temporal depth, collective memory, social dimension, mental images, atmosphere, and genius loci, which can be seen as the overall experience or spirit of the experience (Forss 2007).

Places imagined during play become a part of the actual place. They are a surreal layer of the actual place, or a narrative one which is tinted by elements of magical realism, which exists only for a fleeting moment and may not be observed through realism-tinted spectacles. It is as if ownership of the place is transferred for a moment. Players may be attracted to place by something mythical, touching and enticing outside of their typical world of observation. The space is subsequently conquered for the duration of the experience through play.

This layer which exists during play also creates a relationship of attachment to the place on an emotional level. Place-based play facilitates adult play places, and the play location is no

longer the same as it was before play. The dimension that play introduces leaves a trace in the player's experiential world: what has seen cannot be unseen. As a result of this, the place is permanently experienced in a post-play way: seeing the place brings back the emotion and memory of what was experienced while playing.

### **Mätäsmetäs—What and Why?**

The project was developed in response to a desire to increase use of selected hiking areas. The functional premise for the project was to examine whether art-based, participatory activities could encourage participants to experience these places in new, emotionally based, and experiential ways. Another premise questioned whether that new experience could be used to invite new friends to the sites for repeated visits, spreading the word about them, and sharing pictures taken at the sites on various social media channels. Thus, the project questioned whether reinterpreting photographic, forest-themed art could appear as a playful cartography of these places, producing a virtual mental map of the place, drawn by emotions.

As a background to play, Finnish forest-themed art was gathered. Finland is the most widely forested country in Europe, with four hectares of forest per resident. (Natural Resources Institute Finland 2013). To most Finns, the forest represents the essence of the Finnish landscape. Almost all Finns probably remember their childhood forest games, and the forests in which they played them. The project concept relies on the presumption that the places where we played as children are important to us in a deep way.

The forest is an important place for Finns, and taking exercise in it is a natural activity for most. The everyman's rights mean that people can move about the forest and gather the plants that grow food there without a landowner's permission (Ministry of the Environment 2016). This old tradition supports the practice of moving about in nature and plays a part in maintaining and strengthening Finns' relationship with the forest. According to a recent study (Kantar TNS 2018), three-quarters of Finns are extremely or quite interested in the forest, and 60 percent of Finns go to the forest at least a few times a month. Spending time in nature is in itself considered valuable in many ways. A study carried out in several natural parks in Finland shows that people who spend time in nature deeply value the well-being effects of a single trip to the woods, monetized, at €208 on average (Vähäsarja 2014).

Finnish artists have responded to the subject of the forest extensively. In this project fifty different samples were chosen, ranging from paintings of the golden age of national romanticism to comics, from relief to modern environmental art sculptures, from classic literature via folk wisdom and poetry, to narrative prehistory. The selection also includes iconic works, the so-called "stock images" (Karjalainen 2009): images which have played a role in shaping our understanding both of individuals' relationship with the forest and our national identity. By the same logic, several of the selected texts may also be called samples of "stock literature."

Fifty different idea cards were made from these selected examples, and were divided among the three nature centers on the hiking routes. Twelve cards were translated into English. All in all, 1,200 sets of cards (74,400 cards in total) were printed and distributed. All of the cards were also available on the web platform for the entire duration of the experiment in summer 2014.

### ***How Was the Mätäsmetäs Game Played?***

The basic idea of the game was simple: choose an idea card with a forest-themed artwork which excites or attracts you, play with the theme, scale, or method, and, in the end, take and upload a picture of your interpretation to the project's website. The uploaded pictures formed both a gallery and a new community. One dimension of the game was to compare others' interpretations of the same source work and, through the photos, deepen one's understanding of the diversity of forest experiences.

Participants were encouraged to turn themselves into part of the interpretation of the work or to interpret the work indirectly through playthings. To support interpretation, six to eight miniature figures packed in matchboxes were also distributed to participants who preferred to play using scale or otherwise concentrate on playing with objects. The inspiration to use miniature figures came from such sources as the artist Slinkachu (n.d.), who has photographed miniature figure installations in urban environments since 2006. Participants were also encouraged to modify scale on their terms, that is, to take advantage of elements readily found in nature.

With the exception of the miniature figures, the playthings were, for the most part, objects made by the photographers themselves and presented the original object more or less referentially. These replacement playthings have become, by joint agreement, substitutes for the original objects and given the meanings of, and used in the same ways as, their originals (Vygotsky 2016). When no other scale references are shown in the photos with the toys, getting a sense for their true size is hard and the scale can be played with. In this context the plaything becomes, in a way, measureless and even more interesting than before as a subject (Heljakka 2013).

In the pictorial and photography plays of Mätäsmetäs, the toyish substance of the playthings is emphasized. The objects appear in the play in an “as if” role and some objects do so mimetically, others functionally or aesthetically (Piironen 2004). The various “me” roles tried using the playthings can widen and even permanently alter one’s concept of oneself, and the part of oneself produced using artistic methods may be very real and important (Sava and Katainen 2004).

In Mätäsmetäs, the camera is one of the playthings and photography one of the play functions. The play cannot be completed without photography—the camera becomes an essential instrument that enables play and picture play. Even though a camera may be thought of as a toy, its technology means that it also has a useful function in the play, one that goes beyond the immediate play function: it can be used to make pictures and share the play with a wider audience than the original players. From the perspective of play, the camera is a kind of extension of its players, even if it is, at the same time, a toy to be used in the play (Heljakka 2015). The camera as a recorder of reality becomes a tool of rambunctious imagination, through which the resulting visual exemplifies personal inspiration and ambivalent pleasure, which itself is largely born of the tool itself (Kalha 2016).

### *What Was the Goal of Play?*

The players were challenged to create playful reinterpretations of existing artworks. By encouraging playfulness, the desire was to raise the strengths of play. Play is already present in a landscape that is, by its nature, between various realities. It thus has the ability to raise new perspectives and interpretations which differ from normality (Mainemelis and Ronson 2006). The forest is a familiar play site to most Finns, but artworks as meaningful content of play are generally abnormal in that environment (cf. Juel Larsen 2015).

The task of interpretation was not based on direct mimicry; rather, it was one of conceptualizing another artist’s thinking and converting it into a produced picture (e.g. Räsänen 2015). Participants were provided “stock works” as inspiration, but could also rely upon their own visual culture and narrative fund of life stories to add to the picture. The pictures taken of the interpretations are a kind of visual storytelling. In these pictorial stories, there is no plot in the main field of vision, which is usually associated with this concept. Through narratization, things that have been formless and hidden are visualized (Sava and Katainen 2004).

Through the use of art-based methods, the desire was to reinforce the participant’s experience of, and attachment to, place. There was also a desire to enable seeing, doing and thinking in other ways, all of which are operating methods typical to art. At the same time, the aim was to facilitate the participant’s physical and sensory activities and to train non-usual,



lateral thinking, which is also a strength in artistic activity. Through artistic activity, the desire was, in general, to delicately steer the participants in the direction of investigation, stretching their boundaries, and daring them to enter unfamiliar zones (Ylirisku 2016). The aim was a new kind of relationship with the environment, as the process of interpreting and recycling art also required, at its best, a sensitive reading of nature, sensory immersion in the environment, and observation of the effects of one's own activities (Räsänen 2015).

The aims of the method employed in *Mätäsmetäs* may be defined through Sutton-Smith's (1997) modern rhetoric of play. Through this, art education (play as progress) takes place; it is a channel for imagination and self-expression (play as imagination); and it has meaning for the individual (play as selfhood). The conclusion may be drawn from most of the pictures produced during the process that acting silly and wanting to have fun played a central role (play as frivolity).

The stock of images is part of our common mental landscape, and both artists and advertisers have long used this shared relationship with the forest and a feeling about who we are and how we relate to nature and our cultural heritage. The desire now was to give the joy of playing with this stock material to everyone as an everyman's right—to add the dimensions opened by art-based play to the sense of well-being found by being in the forests and to make it possible for forest visitors to experience the narrative layers of places.

### Classification of Pictures

In total, 375 responses to the competition were received. Since website registration was not required to see the idea cards and they were freely available for visitors at the information desks of the hiking routes, it is not possible to know how many people took notice of them. Furthermore, it cannot be estimated how many people were remotely interested in them, but chose not to participate, as well as those who became interested in them and made their own interpretations but did not upload them. The number of uploaded images per participant was not limited. Therefore, it is possible that some chose to participate in several interpretations. There is evidence to support that not all interpretations were uploaded. The authors of this paper conducted several project workshops during spring of 2014. In several instances, companies created images as part of recreational events, but all of the created images remained solely for the use and amusement of the participants. Also, almost 900 scouts took part in this activity without publicly sharing photos of their interpretations in the competition. The researchers have seen these produced interpretations but since this study only encompasses interpretations whose process has been completed by sharing them on the website, they were not used as research material.

A little more than a quarter (27%) of all participants responded to the anonymous survey that was sent to them automatically after they entered their photo into the competition. According to it the participants were predominantly Finnish (92%), mainly women (65%), and for the most part young adults (24% were 16–25 years old) or people in mid-life (28% were 36–50 years old). The other groups of adults in their working years (19% 26–35 years old and 17% 51–64 years old) are also well represented, but there were only four percent of respondents younger than 16 years of age and only 8 percent of respondent participants were 65 years or older (Hautio and Turpeinen 2015).

This number also corresponds rather well to the average demographics of the overall visitors to natural parks (Vähäsarja 2014), albeit that the number of younger people and women is slightly higher in our case. This can probably be explained by the fact that the project was actively promoted to students in higher education (Hautio and Turpeinen 2015). It is, however, rather surprising that children were not interested in participating in the competition. This may be due to the fact that the prizes (outdoor gear) were not so attractive to them or that the concept itself was too complicated to make them interested. Among the photographs there is some indication that smaller children did participate in making interpretations together with their

families. It is clear, however, that this experiment has attracted almost entirely adult participants and the results can thus be interpreted as evidence of adult, art-stimulated play in nature environment. It is equally clear that this kind of “open call to play” most likely has attracted mainly those who were already willing to play or could be enticed into play with relatively little effort. The primary purpose was to encourage participants to experience the narrative dimensions of the place. Participants were not recruited for socially engaged art or play, but the playing happened more or less accidentally when they got carried away performing the given task.

Individuals who submitted their photographs to the competition website agreed to the rules and conditions of the competition prior to submission. These include sharing all rights to the photographic material with Humak University of Applied Sciences. By consenting to the rules, the participants have assured that they have the rights to the photograph and have asked the other people in the photographs for their permission to be photographed. In this study all photographs were treated anonymously.

In examining the pictures, we first applied material-based content analysis. In accordance with its principles, we aimed to detach ourselves from our earlier assumptions about the visual material and allowed the classifications themselves to form material based on the premises it supplied. We were aware, however, that the definitions supplied in the competition (see Figure 8) task would probably affect how the material was classified.

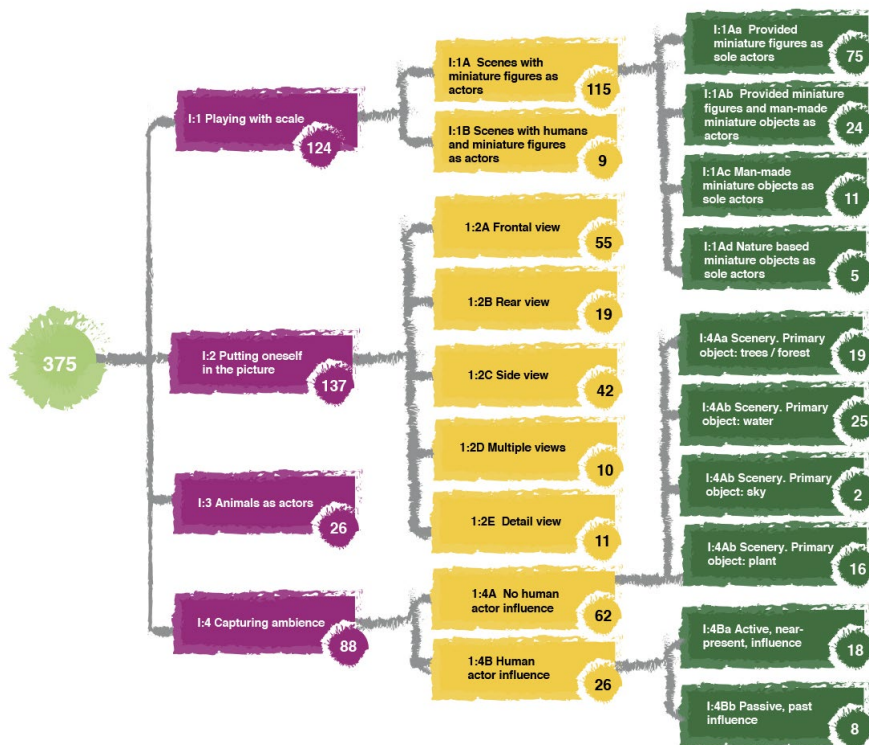


Figure 1: Tree of Classification. Video of Classification: <http://bit.ly/playscapes1>  
 Source: Luostarinen 2019

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We printed all the photographs that were entered into the competition (n = 375) and spread them on a table. After this, we started to form a general picture of them and thought jointly about the factors that united and divided them.

The first basis for classification we chose was whether the picture showed active agency (n = 287) or did not (n = 88). By the absence of active agency, we mean pictures in which the subject is nature itself, for example, as landscape or as a detail. Landscape pictures in which human influence is shown also counted as absence of active agency, when human influence is immersed in the landscape or with the primary purpose of reinforcing atmosphere. Such pictures are of roads, paths, rotted birdhouses, an empty boat on a shore or a close-up of a campfire, for example.

The presence of actors in the picture, either personally or through the medium of playthings, was considered active agency. The basic premise was that the activity depicted originated in an intentional or random brief situation, or was based on the documenting of play. On the basis of agency thus defined, the pictures may be divided further into those in which the actors were either animals (n = 26) or people (n = 261). Pictures showing human activity were further divided into two main classes: those in which people themselves were in the picture (n = 137) and those in which scale was being manipulated (n = 124), either with the help of the miniature figures that were part of the competition or self-made objects.

In the pictures that showed people, the most common methods were to show the actors straight ahead, facing the camera (n = 55) or in profile (n = 42). There were notably few true selfies (n = 2) among frontal pictures. This is a surprisingly low number considering one of the themes used to advertise the competition was “forest selfie.” It is likely that the competition primarily attracted groups of at least two people to take part. This may also mean that engaging in playfulness required a fellow player or at least a supporter.

Pictures showing people may be divided into the more static and the more dynamic. Pictures classified as more static (Figure 2) were connected to the visual reproduction of an artwork, and the more dynamic pictures documented more active play (Figure 3).



Figure 2: An Example of an Interpretation of the Painting *Elämän virralla* [On the River of Life] by Hugo Simberg (1896). The Idea Card with the Original Painting is on the Right. Class I: 2A Putting Oneself in the Picture, Frontal View  
 Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014 (left); Luostarinen 2019 (right)



Figure 3: An Example of More Dynamic Play Linked to an Atmospheric Description of a Deer Hunt in the Stone Age<sup>2</sup>  
 Class I:2D Putting Oneself in the Picture, Multiple Views  
 Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014

Playing with scale ( $n = 115$ ) is based on playthings that were either given, made by the participants, or found in nature. Only a few pictures ( $n = 9$ ) depicted both people and playthings. Perhaps the large difference in size between the person's body and the figure made their natural, shared game as part of the same play environment difficult. Of natural materials, cones and sticks were particularly popular as playthings. The use of cones clearly shows the Finnish play principle according to which the cone, by common agreement of the players, comes to life as an animal.

The miniature figures have clearly been engaged in games in which the roles between humans and figures interact with each other or the role of self may have been transferred to the figure (Figure 4). Alternatively, a game entirely external to the self can be played with the help of the figures (Figure 5). Without additional knowledge of the play event itself it is impossible to know to what extent the miniature figures in each case are representations of the players or merely playthings (e.g. Figure 7).

Photographs that do not show human activity directly or via playthings are quite plentiful in proportion to the fact that the competition specifically encouraged action and playfulness. These may point toward the strong Finnish tradition of nature photography, which strives to eliminate the human influence from the pictures entirely. It may also reflect the fact that in Finland, adults' habits in the forest are traditionally associated with relaxation and silence, or with useful

<sup>2</sup> Shortened Version: "He had waited here for a long time—patiently, without moving. He knew they'd come before long. Now, from the side of the path, he heard a twig bend and snap. Then some movement started to be seen: the shade and light shone in turns in between the pines. A deer appeared from that movement, and then another, a third, and finally the whole herd was visible...now all that was needed was to wait. The man instinctively squeezed his fingers around the shaft of the spear and listened. The deer's sensitive muzzles could smell the air, and their ears turned in various directions, alert. Something got their attention. A cry started to come from the forest, before being joined by another and then a third. The sounds came closer, and then the sound of sticks banging against trees was mixed in with them. The deer were startled and darted into a run along the top of the ridge, straight towards the hunting pits. The man stretched out to his full height from behind a spruce and joined in the cry" (Hautio 2014b).

activities such as hunting or berry picking. The forest is no longer seen as a playground in the same way as places in the home or yard may be. It is also possible that the atmosphere of the original artworks was seen as best depicting what nature already offers in and of itself, without the involvement of human activity. In such cases, the participants may have determined that atmospheric pictures best served the purpose.

It is noteworthy that in the action pictures entered in the competition, the actors were primarily adults. Also of interest is the fact that the miniature figures distributed in three hiking areas were used relatively frequently. Their availability was very limited, but once they were picked up and taken with the competitors, they clearly motivated people a great deal to take advantage of them. The altering of scale that was encouraged in the competition also got people using other miniature elements, either ones they had made themselves or found in nature. The threshold for starting to play and using playthings thus seems to have been low. A small incentive, like the competition, given themes, open-ended “game instructions” and pursuit of winning may have been enough of an impetus to initiate play.



Figure 4: An Interpretation of a Traditional Story about the Spreading of Illnesses;<sup>3</sup>  
 Class 1:1B Scenes with Humans and Miniature Figures as Actors  
 Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014

<sup>3</sup> “You can feel it sometimes, when disease flies in the air. When there was smallpox, you could smell a particularly foul-smelling odor and hear swishing of fine clothing, as if passers-by were dressed in their Sunday clothes. There were a lot of them, headless, legless and people with other deficiencies. They brought disease with them and a lot of people died. They were people from the church, and they spread disease” (Hako 2000).



Figure 5: An Interpretation of the Painting *Tukinuittajat*, Where the Log Drivers Are Pushing Logs Downstream  
Class I:1 Ab Provided Miniature Figures and Man-Made Miniature Objects as Sole Actors  
Source: *Anonymous Contest Participant 2014*

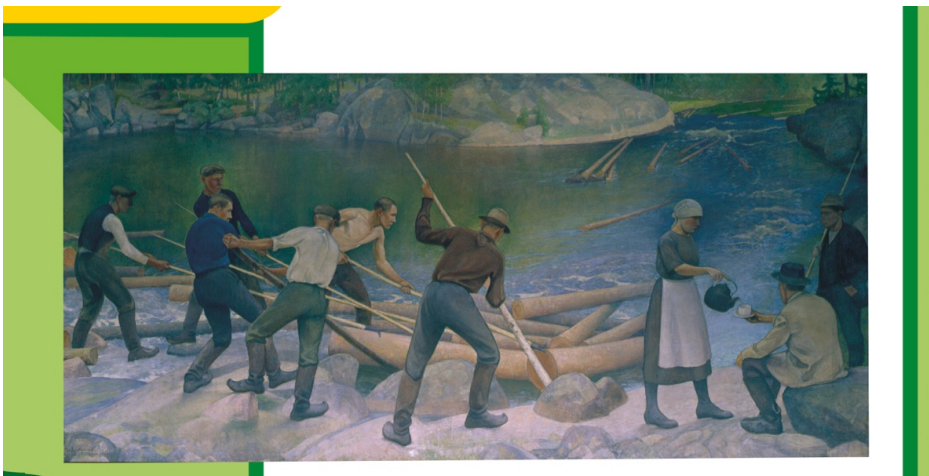


Figure 6: Idea Card of the Painting *Tukinuittajat* [Log Drivers] by Pekka Halonen (1925)  
Source: *Luostarinen 2019*



Figure 7: Man Wrestling a Bear, an Interpretation of the Poem “Hunter’s Song” by Aleksis Kivi (1866)<sup>4</sup>  
Class I:1Ab Provided Miniature Figures and Man-Made Miniature Objects as Sole Actors  
*Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014*

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<sup>4</sup> Shortened version: “Hail forest, hail mountainside / Hail prince of the forest! / Here your son in youthful pride / Full of strength advances / Like a harsh wind from the fell...I will be the forest’s son / The wild spruces’ hero / And the bear I will take on / Where the forest-lord rules / And forgotten be the world” (Kivi 1994, 42).



Figure 8: A Sample of the Gallery of the Photographs. Video of the Gallery: <http://bit.ly/playscapes4>  
 Sources: Anonymous Contest Participants 2014 (Photographs); Luostarinen 2019 (cards)

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## Premises For Examining Pictures

After the preliminary classification process we started looking at the pictures in terms of their representativeness and significance in relation to the research question in more detail (cf. Seppä 2012). For this reason, we chose as the object of analysis only pictures showing a person who was in some way an actor—either by being in the picture or by the action of taking of the picture. This limited the number of pictures to 261.

In our examination of the remaining pictures, we paid special attention to how the functional interpretation of the given original artworks could be seen specifically from a play perspective. On that basis, we continued to choose pictures in which some degree of play could be observed, either while the picture was being taken or just before it. The following factors were among those



that were considered as indicative of play: functionality which included different, non-real roles (such as taking on the role of an animal); functionality in which agreed behavior between players was seen (e.g., conveyed by gestures and postures or the use of playthings); or the altering of reality in other ways (scale changes, changes of the environment by rearranging elements in it). After this stage, a few dozen pictures remained. Four pictures were selected from this group for deeper analysis, based on the examiners' personal preference.

The constantly changing experiences of play seem to defy verbal, numerical, or other rational expression, as they operate, as a rule, in the areas of intuitive thought and reliance on experience. To strengthen the mental images provoked by the pictures, we came back to interpreting them in an environment as similar as possible to the one in which they were taken. The semiotic interpretations of the pictures are thus based on the conversations about the pictures conducted in a forest environment, stimulated with the aid of the walking method. We believe that with these methods we found ourselves most essentially at the source of what really happened in the forest. The more detailed description of the premises of the photo analysis, walking and talking method and discussions about the pictures can be found in Annex 1, available at: <http://bit.ly/playescapes5>.

### Interpretation of Pictures

The four pictures we chose to closely analyze were inspired by Markku Laakso's work *Nuotiollla* [At the Campfire] (Figure 9), Ferdinand von Wright's work *Taistelevat metsot* [Fighting Capercaillies] (Figure 10), a folk story of the giant's throwing of the stone, and the text named "At Mealttime," an atmospheric description of Stone Age people.

Markku Laakso is a contemporary artist originally from Lapland who often depicts his native landscapes and the region's indigenous people, the Sami, in his paintings. Like his painting *At the Campfire* (2009), Laakso's artworks often include Elvis Presley, his long-time idol and pseudo-alter ego (Haltia 2007). Through his work he thus depicts two sides of his identity, and they may be seen as a broader reflection on the fate of indigenous cultures under the pressure of Western culture (Galleria Heino, n.d.).

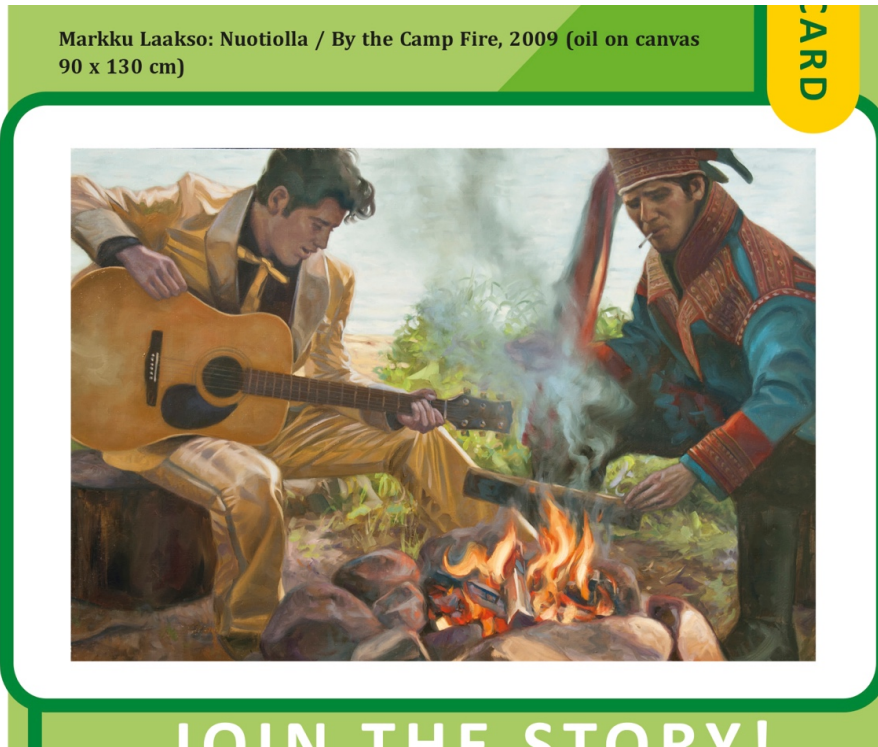


Figure 9: Idea Card Depicting *At the Campfire* by Markku Laakso (2009).  
 Source: Luostarinen 2019

Ferdinand von Wright's painting *Fighting Capercaillies* (1886) is Finland's most reproduced artwork. This detailed painting from nature has appealed to Finns for both the quality of its technical finish and the familiarity of its subject, and it can be said without exaggeration that every Finn has come to know it. The battle of the capercaillies has drama and tension, which charges the artwork with deeper meaning. It has been seen as particularly strongly symbolic of Finland's struggle to achieve independence and retain it during the Second World War (e.g., Ateneum Art Museum 2017).

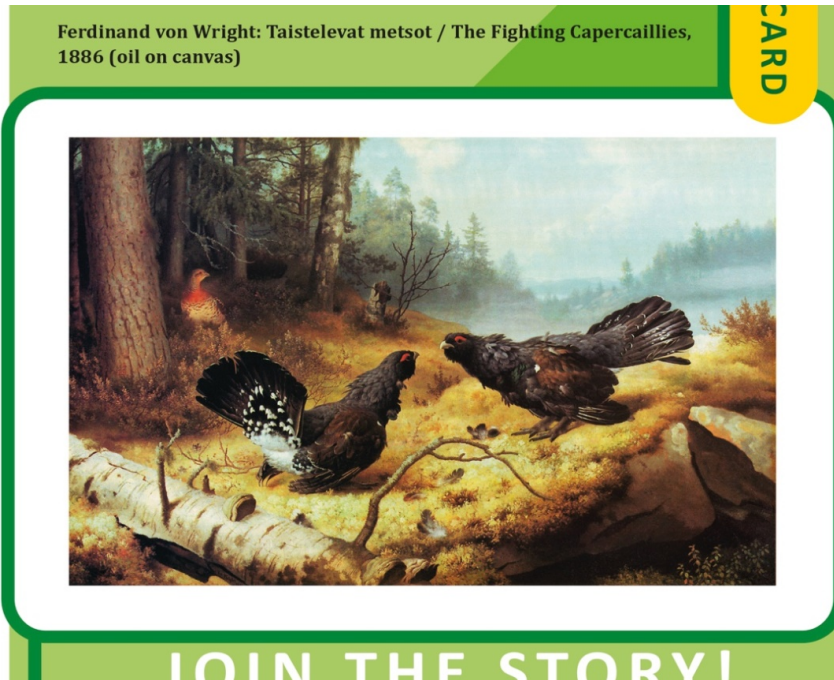


Figure 10: Idea Card Depicting *Fighting Capercaillies* by Ferdinand von Wright (1886)  
 Source: Luostarinen 2019

Both paintings contain strong, recognizable elements, which nevertheless get viewers speaking from different perspectives. They also refer to nature while discussing the artwork. *Fighting Capercaillies* and the traditional male Sami dress in *At the Campfire* probably offer Finns a very different chain of associations than representatives of other cultures. On the other hand, the figure of Elvis Presley is known worldwide, even if he does have different cultural connotations depending on the viewer.

“The Giant’s Stone Throw” is a typical Finnish folklore tale that reflects the myths and morals of people and explains the existence of things, such as nature formations. The story is easily identifiable and can be set in many nature environments. The tale exists in many variations that have been collected from different parts of Finland.

Just then the giant was in his tower, using his witch-horn to see where his deer had disappeared to. From Lapland he saw all the way to Tavastia and saw the deer squirm and how happy the woodsman was with his catch. Then the giant got terribly angry. He took a sharp square stone from the wall of his castle and threw it at the hunter down in Tavastia. With a terrible crack the stone landed on top of the wicked woodsman. To this day there is a big stone there. (Härkönen 2011)

The Stone Age with its hunter-gatherer means of subsistence is closely linked to forest as resource and way of life. Therefore we decided to include a few stories of Stone Age life in the idea cards. “At Mealtime” is a story that describes in detail how people used to prepare their food and eat.

A white foam spilled out from the bark lid on the pot onto the stove. It bubbled for a moment on the hot stone surface and then vanished. A woman picked up two pieces of animal skin to protect her hands and moved the hot stones further away from the pot. Then, she took the pot by the sides and took it off the stove and onto the sand by the waterside, among the people who had gathered there to eat. They took pieces of meat and the soft-boiled bulrush roots pieces out of the pot and put them on their pieces of bark. With their nimble fingers the children stuffed food in their mouths. Their parents took longer over their food, savoring it. The meal was accompanied by the relaxed hum of conversation until the last piece of meat was eaten and the last specks of boiled roots were peeled off the insides of the pot. The children gamboled off to play and the smallest ones fell asleep in their mothers' arms. A dog poked around in the cold stove in the hope of finding some scraps to eat. (Hautio 2014a)

### *At the Mealtime*



Figure 11: An Interpretation of the Story "At Mealtime"  
Class I:1 Ad Nature-based Miniature Objects as Sole Actors  
Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014

This very minimalistic interpretation relies on just four factors: the stone, the spittle, the leaf, and a broken spruce cone. Even if it communicates just one detail of the story, it manages to create a very strong tableau. The background has been intentionally blurred in order to force the viewer's focus directly on the objects. The setting reminds the viewer of an object on a pedestal or an altar, thus highlighting its importance and perhaps even a sacred nature.

The player-photographer(s) have executed the setting with great care and confidence. They have used only natural materials. It may have been a purely practical choice or it may have more profound meanings, such as deciding to use only materials that would have been available in the Stone Age, or even to underline the close relationship of humans and nature at that time. The use of a spruce cone may also be a subtle conscious or subconscious reference to the tradition of playing with cones. From the materials available they have selected those which most closely resemble the curve and color of a clay pot and completed it with other details in the same scale. Due to the blurring effect, nature has almost vanished from the field of vision. Only the brown and green colors in the background remind us of nature, and at this scale they could be anything:

sand and grass or rock and forest. The work is strong, in a silent way, and trusts that one carefully chosen detail can convey the story and its atmosphere.

The materials are few and easy to find in the vicinity. Therefore it has not taken a long time for the setting to be built. The installation of the cone-pot scene seems to be of temporary nature. One can easily imagine how the leaf will soon be blown away by the wind, the spittle will dry and the cone will keel over, leaving no traces in the forest. It has but for a few moments put a small detail in the spotlight and told a story.

### *The Fighting Capercaillies*



Figure 12: An Interpretation of the Painting *Fighting Capercaillies*  
Class 1:2D Putting Oneself in the Picture, Multiple Views  
Source: *Anonymous Contest Participant 2014*

This interpretation shows us a concentrated scene of two “male capercaillies” fighting for their territorial and mating rights while “the hen” keeps her distance, albeit being fully aware of what is happening. Shapeshifting into an animal has strong symbolic significance and deep cultural and narrative roots especially in mythology and folklore.

There is a lot of dynamism in the picture, brought about through the interaction between the players. The crouched positions of the fighting birds, as well as the apparent nonchalance of the hen, are the focal point of the drama, the intensity of which is further accentuated by facial gestures of one of the “birds.” The interpretation is true to the original work when it comes to drama and tension and the fact that the players are clearly at the center of the depiction. The players did not, however, seek an exact reproduction of the original work’s forest landscape.

The setting is rich in detail: the striped hem pulled on the backside of the person in the foreground is a substitute for the white tail feathers and the red coat of the “hen” is a reference to the red feathers she has on her throat and breast in the original work. The attention to detail suggests that the play has been planned carefully and executed with both passion and joy. By the looks of it, the actors are not just posing but empathizing with the feeling of the original work.

Making of this scene probably entailed a lot of laughter, action, many kinds of “capercaillie clucking” and other noises, too.

*The Giant’s Stone Throw*



Figure 13: An Interpretation of the story *The Giant’s Stone Throw*  
 Class I:1B Scenes with Humans and Miniature Figures as Actors  
 Source: *Anonymous Contest Participant 2014*

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This picture contains a lot of variation and details. It consists of several people playing together. “The giant” is pushing a large stone and the “deer” is being chased by the “hunter” who has raised her spear and points it to it. The story has been completed with a miniature figure lying partially under a stone. The dramatization of the events represents a continuum and in doing so almost resembles a comic strip arrangement. The background events have been blurred in order to highlight the details in the front. The picture also refers to the logic of time. The things that happened earlier are already a bit blurred and the current moment is on focus.

Aside from the more intentional playthings, the boulder, spear and “antlers(?)” on the head of the “deer,” the picture also contains, on purpose or by chance, a number of symbols, such as the dried branches in the foreground which resemble a deer’s antlers. It is also possible that the pine cone in the foreground has been placed intentionally next to the antler-like branches, paying respect to the age old tradition of playing with cones in the forest and imagining them to be animals.

Unlike documentary photos, where people and happenings are usually in the sharp focus, the people in this picture are just as blurred as the backdrop scenery. They seem uninterested in communicating with the camera—they are communicating with each other and the story. It underscores the original story and its origins: when stories like this were shared and communicated orally from one generation to another. In the communication process, storytelling also involved much playing and acting.

*At the Campfire*



Figure 14. An Interpretation of the Painting *At the Campfire*  
 Class I:1B Scenes with Humans and Miniature Figures as Actors  
 Source: Anonymous Contest Participant 2014

In the *At the Campfire* interpretation, the environment has been cropped out, which puts the focus directly on the figures and accentuates the intensity of the documented action. Tight cropping also enables the illusion created by the twisted scale: A person is placed upside down and “shrunk” so that his beard has become Elvis’ hair, and singing is emphasized with the mouth out of proportion. On the other hand, a piece of sausage represents the man in native dress. Within this picture, little is turned into big and big into little so the two are momentarily on the same scale.

This picture also relies heavily on the viewer’s ability to code items into something else with relatively small clues. The top of the sausage has been peeled and split into fourths and a birch leaf has been added in the cut in order to make reference to the traditional Sami four-pointed men’s hat. The masculinity of the arrangement is further enhanced by facial hair and cigar. The campfire has been built in quite a minimalistic fashion by using food items.

The picture has been made with considerable effort—the setting has been staged on a board in the foreground whereas the person has been placed upside down on a table, between the table and the board. He also wears a black shirt in order to make the rest of his body as invisible as possible. The guitar has been carefully carved and the rest of the items have been cleverly chosen among ordinary hiking materials and transferred into credible likenesses of the originals.

### What Did the Pictures Tell Us about Play?

The pictures show a variety of replacement playthings that work as play prompters: a broken cone becomes a pot, a stick becomes a spear, and a sausage can replace a person. For the most part, the playthings were made by making small changes or they were functional as they were. An exception is the Elvis figure’s guitar, which was clearly painstakingly made. One picture shows a readymade plaything, a miniature figure. The presence of completely unseen playthings that were based solely on imagination was impossible to conceive on the basis of the pictures alone. On the other hand, the task’s request to photograph play could hint that such invisible figures or objects were undesirable content for at least the part of play that was photographed. The reliance on agreement that is characteristic of a play situation and the suspension of belief that enables play and rejects realism and logic during play are clearly observable in all pictures. It is particularly visible in pictures in which the players themselves have adopted roles and through that, turned themselves into playthings.

The role and significance of the play location is shown in very different ways in the pictures. Nature is most clearly a part of the whole in the interpretations of the *Fighting Capercaillies* painting and “The Giant’s Stone Throw.” In these interpretations, nature forms a background into which the play melts. In the interpretation of “The Giant’s Stone Throw” this may even be seen concretely through the use of the camera’s focus function.

In the *Fighting Capercaillies* interpretation, the forest is an essential event setting from the perspective of the story. It would not appear to have any other role, even though in the painting the landscape was chosen and cropped from an aesthetic, possibly intentional national-romantic perspective. The passion for active creation was probably more important than finding the perfect scenery. The players’ actions were clearly the image’s most important message and, presumably, the most important stimulus to initiate play in the first place. This is conveyed in the intensity that may be seen on the players’ faces and in the precision with which details have been achieved in the postures and roles internalized. The interpretation is not completely faithful to the original work, and it has clearly been reshaped in the participants’ likeness.

On the other hand, in the “Giant’s Stone Throw” interpretation, a natural detail, a cube-like boulder, defined the entire play location. It was a substantially important element for the start of the whole play, and, in practice, one of the playthings. The natural proportions in the picture and the position of the boulder on the hillside are also important for the storytelling—the throwing of the stone as function is reinforced by the players’ positions. A narrative continuum (the act of the stone throw and its results which are seen in the foreground) has also been built into the picture,



which reinforces the desire to use the picture to tell a whole story instead of recording a single moment.

In the *At the Campfire* interpretation, cropping helps maintain the illusion of human figures achieved through a scale change, as it places the parts that would give the illusion away outside the picture. Even though the figures are only referentially human, the desire to believe in them is strong. The photographers wanted to offer viewers a shared play in which we can all hear the song of an oral-cavity Elvis with a big mouth, feel the warmth of the campfire and see the sausage-man enjoying the music. The illusion of life is so strong that the extra hands do not bother us and the feeling of the place is intense, despite the cropping.

An illusion was also aimed at in the interpretation of “At Mealttime,” in which all elements that could remind us that the cone is not a clay pot have been excluded. Excluding scale factors from the picture emphasizes the role of the plaything itself and expands its capacity for expression (Heljakka 2013). Who the players are and what or how they played in the picture remains the knowledge of the photographer(s), as the picture does not reveal any more than that.

### Conclusions: What Really Happened in the Forest?

With the Mätäsmetäs experiments, we challenged people to think about both art and the forest in different ways and to take charge of both of them in a new way with the aid of a common factor, play. We wanted to experiment with whether adults would play when offered inspiration (artistic content), a framework (instructions), an incitement (the competition), and an environment (nature). We were also interested in the relationship between content and the environment in this play and what kinds of additional meanings are possibly connected to playing.

Both the classification of the visual material and the analysis of a few pictures using the walking-talking method show that participants really did play in the forest. The pictures show clear signs of adults surrendering to play and proof of use of playthings. It looks as if adults’ play may be stimulated using art-based exercises and that adult players make astonishingly multidimensional and deeply meaningful picture interpretations, as long as they are given, through play, a good reason to do so, and the freedom to throw themselves into action. Giving permission to act differently and free oneself from familiar operating models, in the form of an idea card, was enough, and the forest suddenly acquired new experiential, functional, multi-sensory purposes which crossed the boundary of normality.

The pictures we analyzed show that adults can be encouraged to play, in very differing ways, with the aid of art-based stimulation. Play happens both through playthings and by surrendering oneself to the various roles in the play. The stimulus offered by the original artworks, combined with the players’ imagination and ability to throw themselves into different situations, made the immaterial structure of the play possible, without which the play would not have had meaningful content or could not have happened. The natural environment and the playthings that the participants were either given in readymade form or made themselves, formed the physical dimension necessary for play, which allowed it to occur (cf. Juel Larsen 2015).

Play opened a new, almost magical or surreal dimension of the place, one which was only open for a limited time during the play. Play also facilitated new perspectives. When playing with scale, people needed to kneel down in the forest, feel the moisture of the moss and smell the decaying leaves. The premises of the artworks supplied led people to investigate their environment from new perspectives—for example from that of a caterpillar, woodpecker, or hare. Such multi-sensory experiences, combined with the emotional state achieved in play may permanently alter the experience of a place. The environments in which the play happened formed places of memory whose playtime dimension will remain forever. At the same time, people may, through roles, assume ownership of a new experience or understanding which will remain with them in other situations as a new layer of their identity.

Place also has meaning for the birth of play: the material was to be interpreted on the terms of the place, in interaction with the place and in the security of the place. A natural environment

may have a substantial significance as a setting for play, or it may even be just scenery for play, sometimes even consciously cropped out. But it is still in the background and has an effect on what is done. The forest also offers shelter in which an adult, too, can safely play, hidden from judgmental, disparaging eyes. As a result of play, the emotional, visual experiential map of the forest as a whole, and of the play sites, changes.

The visual material tells us that even though people wish to play in peace, they can also be proud of their play and may wish to share the products of it with other players using social media. Through sharing, play also creates a positive mood for viewers and arouses their interest in the play sites. Seeing one's peers' play lowered the threshold for surrendering oneself to play. A total of 375 photographs were entered into the competition, which is a very large number considering the rather small size of this campaign. The competition prizes were not significant enough to be the only or even main reason for participation. A better explanation for such high participation is that sharing one's own play was felt to be meaningful and a motivation in itself. Uploading pictures to the platform for others to see also produced a kind of ephemeral new community—"we who played in the forest."

As a functional environment, the forest is felt, especially from a Finnish player's perspective, to be a particularly free place—a space in which the everyman's rights, including the right to play, are in force. Spending time in the forest and the rules that go with it—such as the right to move about in the forest, honoring its untouched nature, but at the same time freely using its resources—are the core of the Finnish relationship with the forest. The sense of ownership over the space is momentary, but strong. Other public functional environments do not convey the same message of a license to do things, as in those environments where the actor is subject to various rules and norms, and the object of external eyes in ways that they cannot control.

Playing requires a flight from reality to a space in which principles that differ from those in the real world apply. There, the unusual becomes usual and objects and people may be given abnormal properties and names. Through play, the players take possession of the space and content of play, and in so doing adopt roles and behavioral models which often differ from the behavioral rules of the real world. In this magic circle, the possibilities are almost boundless: that which cannot be physically achieved may be conjured up in front of one using the imagination. Thus, for example, a person turns into an aggressive capercaillie, a huge boulder can fly through the air, Elvis comes back to life, and a broken cone becomes a clay pot.

People are not generally used to playing with art, and even approaching art itself may be considered difficult, but in the forest, an informal, non-hierarchical environment, perceiving it and interpreting it personally is less bounded and safer. Play gives players license to put even their wildest visions into practice, as it feels only like play, fooling around, from which players can return, if they wish, to the rational world at any time. Whether the premise, then, is a well-known picture that is considered iconic and "sacred" or a well-known text, it can be brought to life through play in the forest and owned in a new way. Play makes it natural to figuratively move oneself into the picture or story and examine it from the inside, through one's own experience and the meanings thus generated. They are inscribed on the player's memory in a way that mere external examination of the work would not be able to produce.

On the basis of the material, the *Mätäsmetäs* method seems immersive, and an experience of becoming part of something. It facilitates suspension of belief, both in the art and the place, and allows the players to dive into the art, both by immersing themselves in the art and by forming an attachment to the place, that is, by merging with the place. The method changed the participants from art viewers to art makers.

Although the impetus for play were, in this case, Finnish works of art, and the experiment was made in Finnish forests, the concept can, without difficulty, be transferred into any other natural environment with "stock works" from the culture of a specific area. Each culture and every place have iconic paintings, folklore, and literature that could give a deeper perspective to that specific location when used with an adaptation of this method. There is evidence that the

method can be applied in urban surroundings as well, if the subject matter in the idea cards support it (Luostarinen 2019). The method can also be easily adapted for use with other, more targeted audiences that have a need to adopt new ways of learning (especially about art, culture, and literature), to reflect upon themselves and their surroundings, to engage in self-expression, and to connect deeply to a place. Suitable target groups could include pupils, students, and immigrants. The Mätäsmetäs method can also be used in workspaces as means for teambuilding, recreation, or boosting innovation, and it has significant potential in social and health care work where it can be used in context with youth work or therapy and more purposefully in socially engaged art practices.

The pictures of play taken in the forest appear as evidence of the time of the ludic turn depicted by Sutton-Smith (1997), in which play becomes an ever more important part of culture. They also prove and reinforce adults' right—and desire—to play, called for by Heljakka (2013) in her manifesto. Like spending time in the forest, play should become an everyman's right, not limited by age, social conventions, or hierarchies. The same approach should apply to the use of play as a source and instrument, and for personal viewing of art in general: everyone should have the right to visit the world of art for a shorter or longer time whenever they want to; to walk around, inside, or through it; to be stimulated by it; and to take advantage of its fruits as they wish.

### **Acknowledgements**

The original project was supported by the European Union Social Fund Finland (project code S12534) in 2014. This research paper based on the material produced in 2014 did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Special thanks to Director of Engagement Janet Cooper (Dublin Arts Council, Ohio, USA) for final fine-tuning and spell checking the language.

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ISSN 2326-9987