

Sculpting Places with Play: Revealing the Alternative Dimension (of Place) with Participatory Photoplay

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Biography

Nina Luostarinen is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Lapland. She is fascinated by visual things in general and especially by the power of photography. A common thread in her work has been believing in serendipity, existence of the invisible worlds and enabling illusions. In her current work she is researching the possibilities of art-based play in regards to place attachment.

Abstract

This visual essay works at the confluence of art, place and play and presents a practice which asks: what can happen if we take a group of adults and classical paintings as inspiration and have them play together in specific places? It aims to demonstrate the visual souvenirs of adult play, the photographs taken by the participants. The objective is to interpret them in order to gain an understanding of how hierarchy-free encounters in the liminal space of play can foster empathy for places. Pausing to gaze at the visual data, it seems that with art-based play, we create lasting memories after which the place, the players and the source art can never be seen with indifference again. This can

lead to emotions, actions and activism towards a more desirable future.

Keywords

Re-interpretation; empathy for places; photoplay; future; art-based intervention

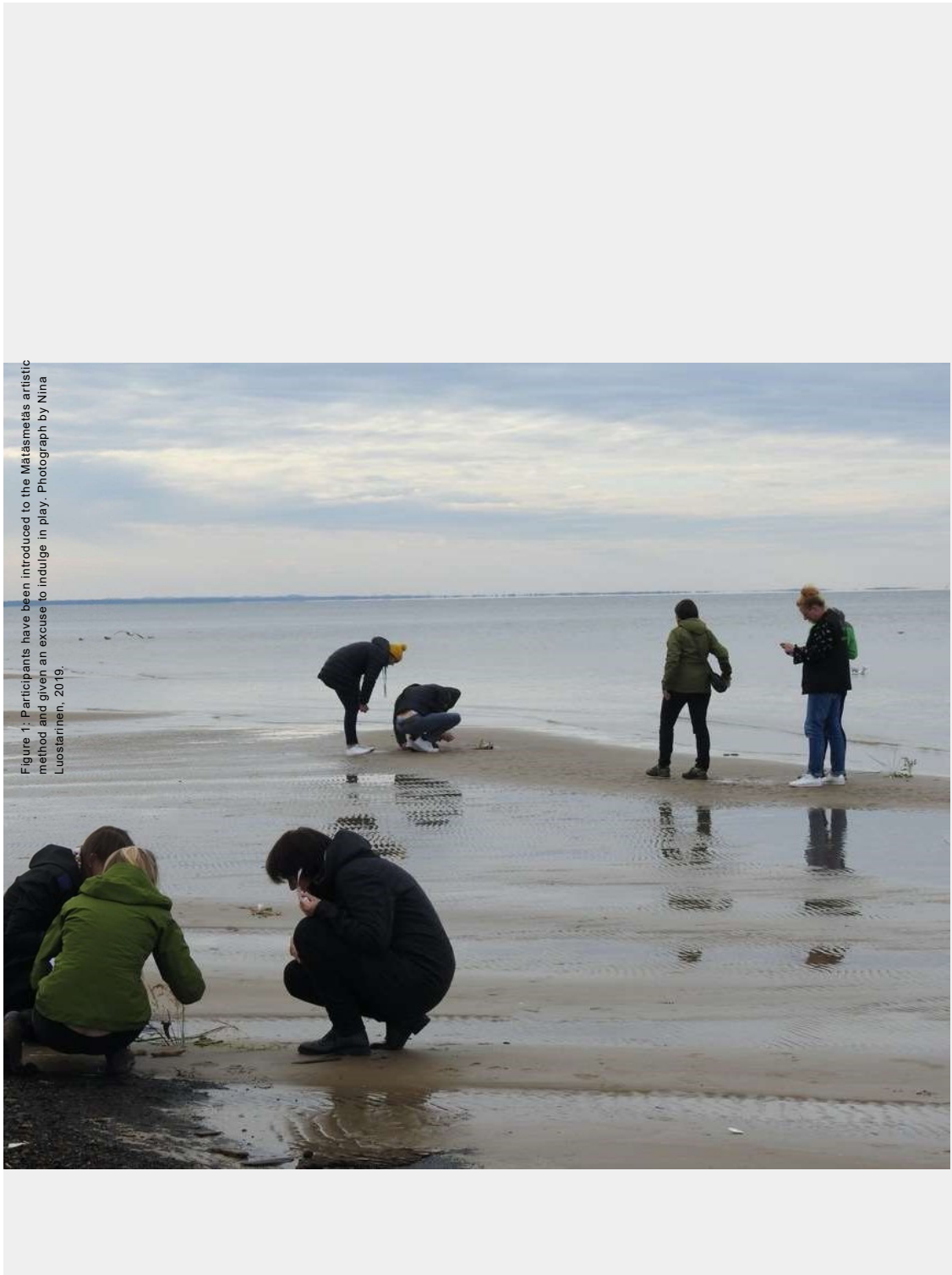


Figure 1: Participants have been introduced to the Mätasmetäs artistic method and given an excuse to indulge in play. Photograph by Nina Luostarinen, 2019.

The film spoof: An introduction

This visual essay presents my second Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) research cycle of an artistic method called Mätäsmetäs. The Mätäsmetäs artistic method is one excerpt of my assemblage of piloted experiments, which are all linked to the phenomenon of ludic turn (Sutton-Smith, 1997), the shift in sensibility that enables experiencing living through play. My experiments share a common question: when creating a playful intervention within a place, thus revealing its narrative and otherworldly dimensions, can we generate the soil for place empathy to emerge?

I am a doctoral candidate in the University of Lapland, Faculty of Arts and Design, and the Mätäsmetäs development process presented here is part of my research, which deals with the confluence of art, place and play. Mätäsmetäs has been developed since 2014 following the principles of ABAR. As Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) state, ABAR is a research strategy which guides the progress of research in the cycles of action research and uses art as a catalyst for development work. The original aim of development work in Mätäsmetäs was to give visitors new insights into recreational parks (Vartiainen & Luostarinen, 2015). To reach this goal, the playful task was created: make a photographic reinterpretation of nature-themed original folklore, literature or a fine art painting related to that place. The results of the first cycle were surprisingly versatile and profound and thus encouraged me to continue with this topic. The prime motivator for these additional sequels was to enhance empathy for places. It seemed that if people were to discover and playfully experience the narrative layers of places, lasting memories and emotional bonds would be created (Luostarinen, 2020). Based on the findings of the first Mätäsmetäs project, it seemed evident that there was potential for this artistic method to be developed further (Luostarinen & Hautio, 2019, Luostarinen 2019a).

Since the original project in three national parks in Finland in 2014, the artistic method has been sprouting out in various places for different groups. It was adopted by, for example, a refugee integration staff member and a mental health nurse for their purposes and reuse. I have developed this artistic method further and conducted workshops with the method in venues such as the *Sustainable Placeshaping Conference* in Tampere, Finland (Luostarinen, 2019b), *The EUROPARC Conference* in Jurmala, Latvia and the *Celebrating Our Diversity Forum* in Hanasaari, Finland. These last two are the image sources for this visual essay (Figures 1–10). Even though it may seem like a huge leap from a national park into conference surroundings, all the conferences were dealing with topics somewhat linked to this artistic method. In Tampere, the conference was about means of placeshaping; in Jurmala, it involved national park staff from all over Europe; and in Hanasaari, it was about developing an inclusive and sustainable future. So, the participants were eager to find new tools for their objectives, and, furthermore, all the mentioned conference locations were set in noteworthy nature locations. So, my second ABAR development cycle mainly focused on comparing these leader-guided workshops in varied surroundings with the first cycle, which was tasks distributed individually online and through posters.



In the Mätäsmetäs artistic method, the key elements are imagination, alternative worlds and adult playfulness. The method's development work is related to Abramovich's (2020) thoughts on parallel worlds and how artists should help to reveal these invisible dimensions as well as to Salami's (2020) idea of sensuous knowledge. The artistic method encourages participants to dive into places in multisensory ways and find new meanings of the objects, textures and structures that exists there. The aim of the artistic method is also related to synaesthesia – perceiving other dimensions of reality (Campen, 2007). Through this method, introducing playful art-based interventions into places, we can create intended synaesthesia even for those who do not have the neurological capacity for it. The artistic method encourages pretend play in adults: seeing alternative and narrative dimensions and beyond the mundane.

Lennon (2015) suggests that an artist is needed for suggesting alternative patterns of imagining in artistic interventions, but I propose that artists are merely needed to unleash the participants' imaginations and give them an excuse or permission to behave in an unorthodox way. As Deterding (2018) states, alternative, adult-appropriate motives are needed to account for their play, to give permission for an adult to engage in playful or imaginary activity. In the case of Mätäsmetäs, the alibi to reach this liminal space is found in the form of a living statue reinterpretation task. Or, as Legaard (2020) sums it: play experiences typically unfold in a realm of their own, typically in a middle ground between reality and imagination. So, we still have the place where the playing took place, but we blend it with the fanciful play-layer. Rosen (2017) pointed out that play can provide a counterpoint to cynicism because play allows experimentation and creation as well as imagining and enacting new ways of being and living. She suggests that, conversely, activism can help shift the contours of play. Linking emotions and imagination to activism is not to discount the importance of rational deliberation but rather to add to it. Bruce (2011) sees play as rehearsing for the future and Shepard (2011) sees play as a step away from reality to conjure up new possibilities for the future. I agree very much with them that if we, though play, can imagine the (un)desired future, it can lead to activism. Rosen (2017) and Bruce (2011) discuss about play as politics in regards children. I am willing to suggest that the same arguments are valid for adults as well.

Pithouse-Morgan and Samaras (2020) search for a sense of place using bricolage as a method, describing it to be working on something in an experimental way, using materials that are readily available. In Mätäsmetäs, this just happens. People use the props available at the place or in their pockets and experiment with how they can be used to depict their imagined narrative created in that place. As Rannikko (2020) suggests, places are not only geographical places, but they can also be emotional communities where one's own and shared stories are being searched. All this intertwined with Tuan's (1977) thoughts on how place is created and maintained through people's emotional attachment and Thrift's idea of how place is involved with embodiment (Hubbard et al., 2004) leads to motivation to re-experiment with reinterpreting or paraphrasing (not mimicking!) art in various places to evoke the multisensory experience of place. Positioning oneself in scenery demonstrates the proportions, and enacting in art-based play helps to foster new kinds of relationships to nature and place and to the development of an environmentally appropriate culture (Fromm, 2009; Heyd, 2007).



Film processing: The research method

During the past years, there has been a phenomenon of statues being dismantled (New York Times, 2020) for representing racist persons or evil reigns. With the images presented here, I am asking if we can reverse this course of disassembling, turn the idea upside down and possibly create alternative realities by setting up scenes with living statues. If we play at being sculptures and enact with places when doing so, can we, at the same time, carve out the desired future?

The Mätäsmetäs artistic method borrows an idea from the popular Finnish children's play Photographer (Leikkipäivä, n.d.) in which participants make living statues. With this, I aim to bring a double meaning to Beuys' idea (Mesch & Michely, 2007) of social sculpture: everyone can be an artist. In Mätäsmetäs, both the facilitator and the participants are seen as artists. And here, additionally, everyone can be a sculpture worth being photographed when reinterpreting existing artworks. Living statues do not need to be violently dismantled, they stay solid only as visual souvenirs of the play: the photographs.

Leavy (2020) suggests that images can make lasting impressions. Visual art may serve as a vehicle for transmitting ideology and can be just as effectively used to challenge, dislodge and transform belief systems and stereotypes. She explains how in participatory projects the aesthetic quality of the resulting visual art may take a back seat to the other advantages of the methodology but underlies how, although produced by amateurs, the visual art produced by research participants can still be quite powerful, especially with respect to conveying emotion.

In Mätäsmetäs, the groups chose the original art images that pleased them and sparked their imaginations for reinterpretation from the large – more than 100 pieces – collection of paintings suggested and printed for them. Here, the visual art worked in intricate ways: as an assortment for inspiration and finally as a photographic pastiche at the end of the participatory play. The participants were asked to freely associate and update the original painting and make pastiche of it to depict either a current situation or the imaginable future. First, they were instructed to build their interpretation in miniature. In order to stage the miniature interpretations of the original, the participants needed to observe their surroundings with a new curiosity. They gained a multisensory experience of the place while touching the materials and envisioning their proportions. The next stage was to create free interpretations of the same painting. Participants were especially encouraged to re-narrate it related to the place where it was interpreted and focus on the roles in their groups. In the discussion part of the workshop, they shared thoughts on transferring the idea in their own surroundings.

Also, the results are analysed by gaining an understanding of and interpreting the visual material: the photographs produced by the participants. Excerpts of proofs of play moments are presented side-by-side with the original visual source art, and each output is briefly discussed when presented. All of them aim to answer the overall questions of how to get adults to play enthusiastically in the middle of a conference, how to prompt them to build up imaginary scenes based on iconic nature-themed fine art paintings and what kind of alternative dimensions both the place and the original art gain during this process.

The contact sheet: The case

Figure 2: The participants discovered the place from new angles during their play. Photograph by Nina Luostarinen, 2019.



Figure 3: The final interpretations with the inspirational piece behind. The participants told a new story while explaining their interpretations. Here, they explained how the migrants crossed the Baltic sea guarded by an angel-like creature. Play can address serious topics while being tactile and fun to make. Original painting *Sammon puolustus (Defending the Sampo)* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, 1896 (reprinted courtesy of the Turku Art Museum). Photograph by Nina Luostarinen, 2019



Figure 4: Here, the tortoise statue located on Jurmala Beach symbolizes the endangered sea turtle trying to come to lay eggs but is being surrounded by tourists who want selfies with it and clashing with animal activists. Original painting same as in Figure 3. Photograph by Nina Luostarinen, 2019.



Figure 5: Here, the original piece of fine art describing reindeer hunting has transferred into an interpretation depicting serious bullying. Original painting *Seremonia (Ceremony)* by Ilkka Lehtinen, 1977 (fragment), (reprinted courtesy of Kouvola Art Museum). Photograph by group 6 in Jurmala, 2019.





Figure 6: In order to find your next stepping stone between good and evil choices, you need to leave your shoes behind.

Original painting *Tienhaarassa (At the Crossroad)* by Hugo Simberg, 1896. (reprinted courtesy of Ateneum Art Museum). Photograph by group 3 in Hanasaari, 2019.

Figure 7: In the making of....in order to create art, some sacrifices are required. Luckily, there was a hairdryer, and the stockings could be dried out after the workshop. Photograph by Ella Kapias, 2019.





Figures 8 and 9: Two different interpretations by international groups about the same original painting.

The interpretation in Figure 8 depicts our dependency on our mobile phones and how we miss our real surroundings because of this.

In Figure 9, the vehicle suddenly stops, and someone flies from aboard. This group had to do so many takes to get the desired image that they laughed so much that the whole place was filled with laughter.

Original painting *Kesänviettoa Ramsön saarella (Summer Day at Island Ramsö)* by Olga Forslund, 1922, (reprinted courtesy of Helsinki Art Museum).

Photographs by group 2 in Jurmala and group 4 in Hanasaari, 2019.







Figure 10, video 1: The ghost from the illustration by Tove Janson in the book *Exploits of Moominpappa*, 1950, has turned into a nightmare of too many trees being timbered. (To see the video, follow this link: <https://bit.ly/3xHWP4I>). The original reference image can be seen here: <https://bit.ly/3xHWP4I>

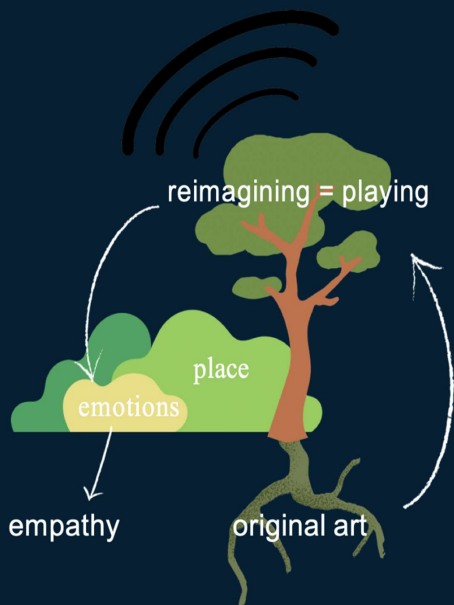


Figure 11: Art-based playful interventions into places have the potential to generate emotions. Emotions can lead to place attachment and empathy towards places where playing occurred. Once revealed, the narrative and playful dimension and layers of places can no longer be unseen.

The exposition: Discussion

This ABAR research cycle showed me the potential of the Mätäsmetäs artistic method for social interaction as well as the earlier goals of place awe and empathy. As all the conference topics where these workshops took place were dealing with consciousness and fair development, the depth of the interpretations – even in the limited workshop time (30–90 minutes) – was overwhelming to me. While not naively claiming that play would be immune to historically sedimented power relations, I agree with Rosen (2017) that if adults approach play within openness, imaginative play has the potential to allow engagement with the possibilities of a more just future. As the images in this visual essay demonstrate, the power of play seems undeniable in evoking a multisensory, emotional and lasting art-based experience of place and also in allowing the experiencing of hierarchy-free encounters in the liminal space of play. The participants brought new and up-to-date meanings to the source art and interacted with the places in witty ways. With a careful selection of inspirational imagery, further adaptations could be easily developed, serving both to find new insights for chosen art pieces as well as to fertilize the novel perception of place. If we create visual images of desired futures, we are creating goals to reach for, and perhaps that can lead to lesser need for disassembling in the coming decades.

As to the evaluations of the conducted workshops, I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm with which the given task was embraced. I was prepared to be accused of arrogance and to be despised: why would adults want to play outdoors when they have come to a conference to discuss serious academic topics indoors? So, I might have started apologetically and felt like a jester. But no, the opportunity was faced broad-mindedly, and no pushing was needed from my, the facilitator's, side. It was not long till I could hear bubbling laughter from the surrounding bushes. The instant feedback I received from the participants in all the workshops was sparking with ardour and mirth – rare emotions to be spotted in symposiums. Many participants in these international conferences said that they will take the artistic method home for local adaptation.

Based on my facilitator experiences of Mätäsmetäs, having witnessed participants' reactions and the visual data produced during the workshops, I suggest that emotional experiences may be the key factors needed to plant a seed for place empathy and our equal existence in places. With empathy towards places and a vivid relation to them, we can pursue the desired future: the future we have already imagined and visually realized.

Watermark: Conclusions

The Mätäsmetäs artistic method is useful by connecting play, the interpretation of visual art and social interactions in relation to a place. There could be several pedagogical implementations, such as in building strategies and future scenarios; in art and environmental education; for refugee and migrant integration into local places, heritage and folklore; and in mental health recovery process. I can also see a potential in tourism and destination design: what a fun product through which to deepen one's connection with a heritage or natural site and at the same time find new insights from your travel mates or colleagues when seeing them taking on a new role during the play.

Playing and having fun is not an obstacle to addressing serious topics. I argue that it is quite the opposite. With art-based play, we create lasting memories after which the place, the players and the source art can never be seen with indifference again, leading to emotions, actions and activism towards a more desirable future.

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