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## Children's visual art and creating through photographs

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### Abstract

Looking at and talking about children's photographs, together with the children, provides us with an opportunity to monitor the view of a child. In this presentation I will analyse children's visual art and creating through photographs taken by children themselves during after-school activities. Images are rich and multifaceted I will examine, what kind of visual art do children create by themselves, how do they document it and how does photography turn into visual expressions. This data shows children's art as a kind of every day design, drawings, found objects and playing with sand, snow and ice.

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### 1. Introduction

Places designed for a specific purpose where activities are controlled by an authority or an institution, play a significant role in the everyday life of children (Kuusisto-Arponen & Tani, 2009, 51–52; Thomson & Philo, 2004, 112–114). Especially schools and recreational facilities are designed and designated by adults as 'places for children'. After-school activities is one such place.

In Finland after-school activities encompass supervised, chargeable extracurricular activities for all pupils in grades 1–2 and for pupils with special needs in grades 3–9. These activities are attended by approximately 47 000 children every year. The core consists of outdoor activities, sports, crafting, play and doing homework, largely arranged in school premises. (Basic Education Act, 1136/2003, 642/2010;

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Finnish National Board of Education, 2011.) Activities are, for the most part, supervised and the so called free play is also controlled. It has been established, however, that children and young people also need time for just being and spaces for meeting friends without schedules and constant control by adults (Aitken, 2001, 16; Valentine, 2004, 84).

I reflect whether after-school activities leave space for children to engage in anything unsupervised and whether children use their time to create their own visual design. In this presentation I will analyze children's visual art and creations through photographs taken by children themselves during their after-school activities. The data comprise ethnographic observations, photographic images captured by children and records of conversations we had on the images.

## 2. Study design

Visual methods, such as photography, offer children ways to address issues relevant to themselves. They can also offer us valuable insight into children's worlds of experience and meaning making. By producing an image, the photographer has enormous interpretive control over selecting the image, its production and consequent message. (Warren & Karner, 2005, 171; Burke, 2008; Holm, 2008; Riessman, 2008, 141–143; cf. Barthes, 1983.) It is appropriate to use visual imagery when traditional methods cannot access what the research is after (Leavy, 2009, 227). Observations and interviews which I made earlier did not seem to be sufficient for a full comprehension of after-school activities (Eskelinen, 2010).

The act of encouraging people to document and share their own reality through photographs is variously termed 'photo voice', 'talking pictures' or 'visual voice' (Burke, 2008, 26; see also Holm, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Photo voice is often defined as participatory photography projects (Wang, 2005), with a mission associated with the lives and living environments of the participants. The increasingly popular technique for eliciting young people 'voice' also have problems in the way it is sometimes employed, especially in relation to interpretation and representation of children and young people's visual 'statements'. Therefore, a critical approach should be adopted towards images produced by children or young people. It is necessary to problematize the whole process in which visual images are being deployed. (Piper & Frankham, 2007, 373–375, 385.)

One of the questions to be answered is, what is an image. Barthes (1983, 9) observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices: to do, to undergo and to look. He thinks that a specific photograph is not distinguished from its referent. The Photograph carries its referent with itself. Latham & McCormack (2009) argue that an image is not "just a representational snapshot; nor is it a material thing reducible to brute object-ness". Images can be understood "as resonant blocks of space-time" (cf. Massey, 2005), they have "duration, even if they appear still" (Latham & McCormack, 2009, 253).

Data collected by photographing is both selective and specific. Instead of merely "decoding" or "translating" visual data into verbal data, interconnecting the visual and the verbal should be the objective of image analyzing. (Collier & Collier, 1986/1996, 169; Leavy, 2009, 217.) Photo elicitation is a method that couples words and images, allowing for an interaction between the two. Through photo elicitation, "the photograph's narrative becomes itself a participatory site for wider story-telling" (Burke, 2008, 28, 34). Images can be found or made, either by the participants themselves or by the researcher (Heisley & Levy, 1991, 257; Flick, 2002, 151; Holm, 2008, Burke, 2008, 28).

The focus of this study lies on the children's participation and the photographs taken by them. The images produced by children and the process of sharing the images and their narratives with children add special value to the data.

### *2.1. Research problems*

This presentation explores children's own creations and how they make their creations visible through photographs. The questions asked are: What kind of visual art do children create by themselves during organized after-school activities? How do they document it and how does photography turn into visual expressions?

### *2.2. Collecting the data*

In this ethnographic study 7–9-year-old children took photographs during their after-school activities. The sample data was collected from a source of 130 children in total, in three different groups in Helsinki metropolitan area during the academic year 2009–2010 (November–December, January–February and May).

The children were asked to photograph what they normally do during their afternoon. As a rule, each child used one afternoon for photographing. We had an average of four digital cameras at our disposal simultaneously. Afterwards I went through the images together with each child, mostly in a couple of days or a week later. First we viewed the images and discussed them together. Then I asked the child to pick up five of his/her own photographs best describing his/her afternoons in the after-school activities. I also asked the photographers to explain why they had selected those five particular images. Finally they were allowed to choose one image they could keep.

### *2.3. Analyzing the images*

Images are the main focus of analysis in this presentation. Less importance is attached to narratives. I evaluate the data to find visual items that have been photographed and images which can be classified as visual expressions.

In this paper children's visual art is seen, along the lines of Wilson & Wilson (1982) as "the self-initiated story-laden drawings that children made for their own enjoyment-images that might be seen as graphic play". Photography and photographs per se are also interpreted as elements of visual expression or art.

## **3. Photographs, items and visual creations**

I presumed that the children would photograph themselves, each other and their mutual play and participation in supervised activities. It surprised me how often and in what way the children took photographs of their surroundings, their own (school) creations of visual art, paintings, posters and notes with pictures on the walls. I got the impression that the children clearly produced visual expression by photographing.

In the results, I first demonstrate situations in which the children documented their afternoons. Then I will give a general account of what kind of visual items were photographed. I present some examples of drawings and other designs photographed by children during the afternoon activities. At the end of the paper, I examine children's photographs as an artistic presentation.

### *3.1. Spaces and places for doing*

In the first after-school activity group the children were allowed to act rather freely, and besides a snack enjoyed together the afternoon programme contained very few guided activities. Instead many of

the children visited school clubs during the after-school activities. As the data collection coincided with an influenza peak, there was a high rate of absence among both children and instructors. Consequently, the children did not do a lot of outdoor exercise, but preferred to spend time in the gym, corridor and facility designated for the after-school activities.

In the second after-school activity group the activities were precisely scheduled and controlled, containing a great number of supervised activities. The school functioned in temporary premises and nearly all children were transferred by bus, which, for its part, dictated the course of the day. During the day the children moved from the after-school activity facilities to the school yard, the canteen, to the place designated for doing homework and to the waiting area prior to proceeding to the gym, school yard or bus. Sometimes children staying longer in the after-school activities would return to the after-school activity facilities from the gym and from outside.

The third after-school activity group did not have any particular place designated as the after-school activity facilities. The children spent most of the afternoon on the school yard engaging in supervised activities and also spending so called free time. The afternoon continued with a snack in the canteen and doing homework in the classrooms. Homework was followed by activities outside, on the sports ground, or in the gym.

### *3.2. Visual items on children's photographs*

The children in the first group focused largely on their surroundings, e.g. posters, maps, paintings, decorative wall paper and various notes and instructions on subjects such as where to leave the shoes. Other popular objects included patterns on shirts and rug sacks, pictures on the covers of board games, images of electronic games captured on screen, library and youth house cards, pictures of playing cards (Narnia) and various sign boards (emergency exit) and stickers (e.g. on automatic vending machines in canteens) as well as pictures on notes hung on notice boards. (Fig.1.(a), 1.(b), 1.(c).) Several spaces and places depicted in the photographs, especially hoops and balls in the storage of the school gym can be interpreted first and foremost as visual expression. There is a strong presence of colours. Similarly many a child had been fascinated by the high glow of reflectors on rug sacks, coats and shoes in the camera flash light. Many images of various spaces and items, painted lines on the gym floor and the rhythmic lines created by ceiling boards and lighting fixtures, or balls in different colours and the hula hoops in the gym storage, to name a few, can be interpreted as presentation of visual art. The children recounted, for example, that the hula hoops overlapping each other hanging on the gym storage wall were colourful or that they reminded them of a car make. The children also recounted that they had explored different backgrounds for their images. The children had also photographed works of visual (school) art hung on the walls of corridors leading to classrooms and inside the classrooms. During photographing the children were allowed to move around more freely than usual. Normally entry to the gym storage, for instance, was out of the question.



Fig. 1. (a) A visual school art; (b) A detail of a sign board; (c) Board games

In the second after-school activity group the children took a lot of outdoor photographs and photographed their mates and themselves together with their mates. The data was collected in January and February when the weather was extremely cold and there was plenty of snow. The images appear mostly in tones of white and grey, with especially the strong red colours of clothing standing out. Inside the after-school activity facilities the children photographed various signboards, instructions printed on paper, covers of magazines and books as well as school books and their own notebook drawings. Ten (out of 45) children also photographed a large painting portraying wild animals, hanging near the canteen. Furthermore the photographs encompassed some images of smaller paintings, chalk drawings, art work by finger paints and collages created by the children themselves. What stands out among the photographs taken by this group of children participating in the after-school activities are images of mounted animals and trophies together with prize medals awarded to the school.

The children in the third after-school activity group, likewise, photographed mostly outdoors capturing the surrounding nature and events on the school yard, but also squares, numbers and lines drawn there. Indoors they documented numbers, illustrated alphabets, pictures of the presidents and objects designed during lessons of arts and crafts with their cameras. They also photographed items of visual art hanging on the walls of corridors created by themselves and their classmates. Especially caps and cap brands were popular objects for photographing, both outdoors and indoors.

### 3.3. *Children's own visual art*

In the first after-school activity group many of the children photographed drawing instruments and each other drawing. Likewise, drawing books which were being used and a few drawings made by an instructor were photographed. One of the instructors was interested in learning how to draw using drawing books and she used to sit down and draw with the children. Besides the usual drawings with wooden colouring pencils and marker pens, some of the children also crafted paper Christmas calendars. In addition the children prepared a collective cardboard Christmas calendar under supervision and decorative paper items for themselves for Christmas. The children were provided daily with an opportunity to spontaneous drawing and crafting, and indeed, some of the children engaged in drawing every day. Drawing often provided a framework for spending time together. The children used to compare their work with each other, share ideas and sometimes work on a piece of drawing together. Yet, the data does not contain many images of completed drawings.

Eleven children (out of forty one) shot images of drawings made by themselves or by their classmates during the after-school activities. An equal number of children had photographed the process of drawing,

whereas only two of the children had photographed both the process of drawing and the completed drawing itself. Hence drawing was photographed, in one way or another, as an element of the after-school activities by one half of the children, participating in the photographing project. It is highly likely that the process of drawing is considered more important than presentation of the end product. To give an example, one of the girls, who used to draw for long periods every day, recorded her own drawing process with an image of pens used for drawing.

Figure 2. (a) portrays two children sitting at a table drawing. Figure 2. (b) presents a detail of a marker pen drawing made by five boys collectively portraying sketches of items such as the sun and plants, animal and human figures, as well as houses and cars. The names of the boys appear on the upper side of the drawing. Almost in the centre of the drawing there are small, evil-looking figures, one of them trying to frighten the onlooker with a wicked laugh.

Drawing is seen to be one of the languages which children use to communicate in the informal settings of their world, both to themselves and to others (Gallas, 1994). Thompson (2010) talks about children's sketchbooks as a *third space* (cf. Leavy, 2009, 232). Drawing can be a graphic dialogue; you draw first, then I draw. Drawing (like photographing) provides opportunities to understand the choices children make. Especially young children tend to narrate events of production. (Thompson, 2010.)

Data collected with the second after-school activity group reveals that only three children had shot images of drawings made by the children during the after-school activities. Some of the children drew various Lego and game figures, for example, but did not photograph them. In principle the children had an opportunity to draw every day after the completion of homework while waiting for a bus or the start of supervised activities. The time for drawing, however, was comparatively scarce.

Instead of drawing and painting, the children in this group seem to have discovered possibilities for creation of visual art on the school yard. The children exploited visual elements provided by nature in winter, such as ice, snow, twigs and branches of pine and fir trees. The children did not necessarily call their creations art. A figure composed of snow and twigs, for example, was called a "stuffed toy" by the photographer, while a piece of ice with resemblance to polar bear was seen as a sculpture.

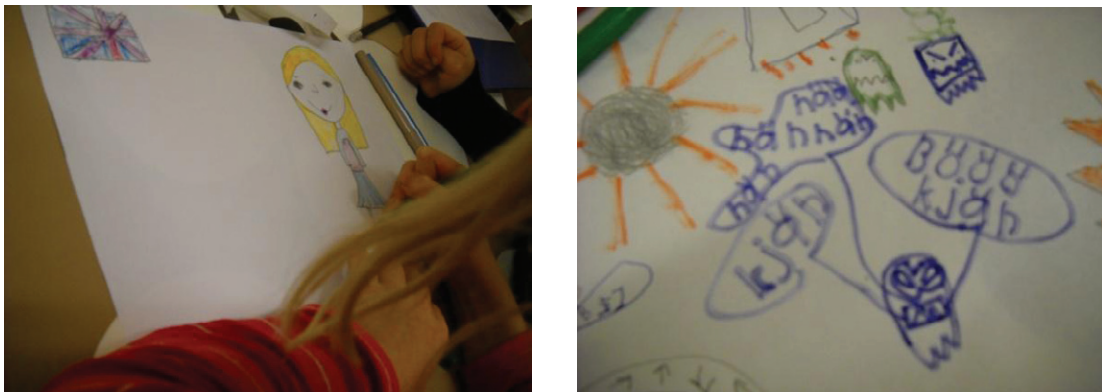


Fig. 2. (a) Children drawing together; (b) A detail of a drawing

Just like in the second after-school activity group, only a few children in the third after-school activity group had photographed drawings made by the children themselves. One of the girls had photographed a manga-style drawing depicting a girl with blue and yellow hair. Three of the boys had captured the image of a camera drawn by their mates. Furthermore photographs taken by the boys included images of two car sketches, a butterfly and a drawing depicting an apparatus and a lot of writing. The upper left corner of the paper in one of the photographs shows the camera which had already appeared in the other

photographs, and in the centre of the drawing there is a text GAME OVER written in large blue capital letters, and below that a serrated mountain range with the text “the first human being on Mount Everest”. The right side of the drawing depicts an oval ring with squares in the middle drawn with the same blue wooden colouring pen.

I did not observe any of the children drawing other than one day two boys sitting and drawing outside. There are, however, some shots of children drawing in a classroom. In addition, the data contain several photographs of designs that can be interpreted visual art composed of sand, stones, branches, cones and leaves. Figure 3. (a) is a snail, narrated by the photographer (John) as follows: “This is the snail designed by the girls. It’s really well made. They have found cones and all and stuck those biscuits there and then the eyes and mouth have been like made of candies.” Figure 3. (b) is a group of holes dug in sand, which were named as a “Works of Art” by the photographer. She also chose this photograph as the most important one representing her own afternoon. And yet it was the first time the photographer did anything like that with her mate. In figures 4 (a) and (b) there is “a stuffed toy” made by snow and a polar bear sculpture made of ice.



Fig. 3. (a). “Snail”; (b) ”Work of art” in sand



Fig. 4. (a) A ”stuffed toy” made of snow; (b) Polar bear sculpture made of ice

### 3.4. Children's photographs as an art

Photographs taken by children can also be interpreted as a possibility for artistic expression and aesthetic experience (cf. Setälä, 2006, 57). The photographers had studied the objects of photography, explored various backgrounds, created different layouts and composites or focused on colours. Eventually the photographs were an intentional attempt at photographic expression. Some of the children recounted how they had selected between different angles and situations or decided which objects to shoot expressly through the viewfinder of the camera. Some of the photographs form a sequence connected with each other, repetition giving them new meanings. Eventually the outcome of some of the images may be considered accidental, created by prevalent lighting conditions or the play of light and shadow, adding an element of surprise to the photograph and creating an impression of modern art in the eye of the onlooker.

The children were fascinated by the idea of others seeing their photographs. One of the questions in the field of art is what and whose works qualify as art (Setälä, 2006, 63). The following photographs (figures 5 a, b and c) bring out the potential of digital photography to convey visual impressions by experiment, repetition, composure and, sometimes, even by accident.

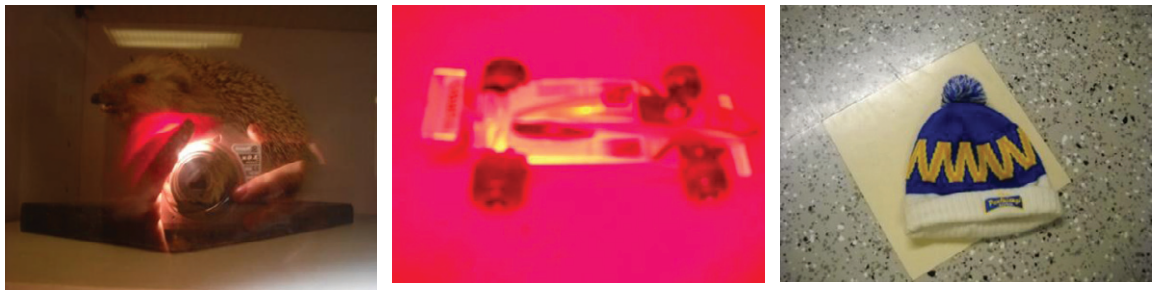


Fig. 5. (a) Reflection from the surface of a vitrine; (b) "A red car"; (c) A hat on the floor

## 4. Conclusion

Looking at and talking about children's photographs, together with the children, provides us with an opportunity to monitor the view of a child. Images produced by children are rich and multifaceted. For children the value of an image does not lie in its technical merits. Instead, children capture items or moments they deem important. They also perceive elements easily overlooked by adults.

My data reveals that photography provided the children with the necessary tool in order to perceive and explore even items previously unknown to them. Photography gave visibility to the observation of details connected with for example building out of sand and the environment, in an unprecedented way. Especially the children in the first after-school activity group took many photographs of various visual items, e.g. details from posters and paintings, whereas the children in the other two groups searched and found interesting items and materials in the nature to create different constructions to photograph.

The children in one of the after-school activity groups drew widely although this was not manifested by the photographic data, which contain but few images of drawings made during the afternoon activities, whereas the number of snapshots depicting visual arts designed by children at school is far greater. Visual arts created by children themselves or their classmates at school were photographed in abundance by all after-school activity groups.



This data shows children's art as a kind of every day design, drawings, found objects and playing with sand, snow and ice. Photography enhances the visibility of children's creativity. Photographing and photographs is one form of that artistic, sometimes empowering expression.

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