

On the Blue Path of Place Empathy

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Biography

Nina Luostarinen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Lapland. She has background in puppetry, new media and cultural management. She has been producer and scenographer for various cultural events and theme parks. In recent years, she has been working in the Humak University of Applied Sciences with projects seeking to connect different forms of art with other fields of life. 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.

Abstract

This visual essay presents an art-based action research, an Emotional Mapping photoplay that took place during the Ärjä Art Festival in August 2019. By showing a dozen examples of over two thousand entries gathered during this playful photo-based intervention in a nature heritage location, this essay discusses the possibilities of reimagining the relationship to a place. During this artistic practice, a significant number of entries depicted a dreamlike blue atmosphere: resting, gazing at or up at the horizon or the sky, sleeping equipment in nature, details of nature and just floating in the sweet idleness of doing

nothing, then finally being one with the landscape and sensing the emotional and narrative layers of the place. By enabling place-specific slow-tempo introverted play and encouraging observation of ludic aesthetics, we might also be able to boost place empathy.

Keywords

Emotional mapping; Visual understanding; Sense of place; Place empathy (Paikkaempatia); Art-based action research; Photoplay; Participatory art; Heterotopia



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The Path that we Follow

This visual essay presents samples of visual imagery obtained during the emotional mapping process. The intuitive selection of the presented images was based on the color blue, which was the common denominator during the whole of the festival weekend. Most of the activities were framed by that color, by the blue-gray sky and lake surface or by a nostalgic dream-blue atmosphere. As the common thread here we follow the distinctive blue color of this place and experience the emotions reflected for the mapping images through that color and its shades. This might cause some art-based intended synesthesia (van Campen, 2008) in readers as well: Ärjä might later be associated with blue. From the viewpoint of the author, synesthesia seems to enable an ambiguous perception of places.

The prime motivator of this activity was curiosity about testing this method as one possible option to increase place empathy (*paikkaempatia*), since as Brown et al. (2019) state, empathy provides a key emotional connection between humans and the nonhuman biosphere. They also suggest art-based interactive experiments for exploring empathy for places. According to Lennon (2015, p.90), we are required to reflect and expand our powers of imagining, and often artistic interventions are needed to enable awareness and suggest alternative patterns of imagining. Or as Foucault (1986) defines heterotopia: spaces have more layers of meaning than immediately meet the eye and simultaneously offer mythic and real contestations of the space. This art-based activity was a hunt to capture imaginative and mythic perceptions of Ärjä.



Image 1. From camera 77 by unknown participant. Do these tree lichen lungs depict anxiety about climate change? Is it harder to breathe? Is our planet suffocating?

A light shade of blue in the shadows of tree lichen.

Ärjä Island is well-suited for this purpose since it has both nature and heritage values. It is known for its long sandy beaches, high shoreline cliffs and deep pine forests. The island is a geomorphically important ridge island on the Oulujärvi ridgeline in Kainuu, Finland. The cultural history of the island includes ancient indigenous Sámi settlements with grazing grounds and ritual sites; later it has been known as a pirate base in the 1860s, for its pine tar runners, and as a leisure location since as early as the 1920s for the forestry company UPM's holidaymakers. There are five buildings on the island which are historically significant and protected under the Antiquities Act. Ärjä is part of the EU's Natura 2000 natural territory program and a national beach protection initiative (Koskela, 2017; Sieppi, 2017).

The forestry company UPM sold the island of Ärjä in Kainuu to the Finnish Government in 2017. In summer 2018, the Ärjä Art Festival was launched. The Ärjä Art Festival is run by the Vaara collective, who are not centrally managed and whose cooperation is based on open and active collegiality and on social, political and ecological engagement. The Ärjä Art Festival calls itself an antifestival that also requires its visitors to plan their participation. The Vaara collective uses the term

antifestival to contrast with regular disposable-oriented summer festivals, where participants are expected to consume and which have a huge ecological footprint as well. At Ärjä, nothing is ready-made and participants are required to bring their own food and dishes, for example. As Ärjä Island is a delicate nature destination, the event aims to take an ecological and low-emission approach at each stage. The aspiration of the Ärjä Art Festival is to use art to create new communal forms to face and deal with the changing world. On their website (Ärjän taidefestivaali, 2019), they claim:

Experiencing, gathering, and multidisciplinary art forms open the unconscious layers of the mind and body. The island's nature, water, trees and sand open the senses, soothe the body and the mind. In the program of the Art Festival, experiential art and the interfaces of science meet. The goal is a step towards an environmentally conscious humanity.

One of the twelve art experiments and practices performed during the 2019 Ärjä Art Festival was a festival-long emotional mapping photoplay project. Saved from going to landfill and used instead for artistic purposes, almost 100 expired disposable cameras were distributed to the participants. They were given the task to observe their emotions and take photographs that depict what they experienced during their stay. The task was explained in the opening speech and summarized on the stickers glued to the cameras as well. They were encouraged to use a playful attitude and reminded of perspectives and angles. The endeavor of this playful intervention in this protected resort was to visually map and communicate the emotions awakened by a place. The participants, who seemed mostly be hiking and art oriented brisk activists, adopted the task voluntarily.



Image 2. From camera 74 by unknown participant. The toyish look of the cameras encouraged ease of engagement.

Blue was the color of the disposable cameras and matched the coat of this young photographer.

This action wanted to encourage visitors to take time to reflect on their emotions and observe their surroundings with the mission to choose and frame vistas to depict their inner world. The driving force and idea was to give an excuse to stop and linger, to have time to connect to the place, listen to the emotions the place evokes, see the place from new angles and perspectives and finally become sensitized to narrative and emotional layers that the place has. The pivotal tool to reach this understanding was to give a toy (disposable camera) and an introvert-applicable playful task (take photographs of the place and the emotions awakened) to generate new seeing by dawdling with the task. It was an art-based excuse to loll on tussocks and gaze at how the wind sways in the canopy. As von Bonsdorff suggests, play, insanity, childhood, and the logic of sleep have ethical weight. Play can lead to unexpected encounters; the logic of sleep does not force you to choose either-or (von Bonsdorff, 2009, p.379). The material environment affects us, but these impacts are often hard to express in words (Rinne, Kajander, & Haanpää, 2020, p.7). Therefore, in this intervention visual means were used to facilitate the formulation of emotions.

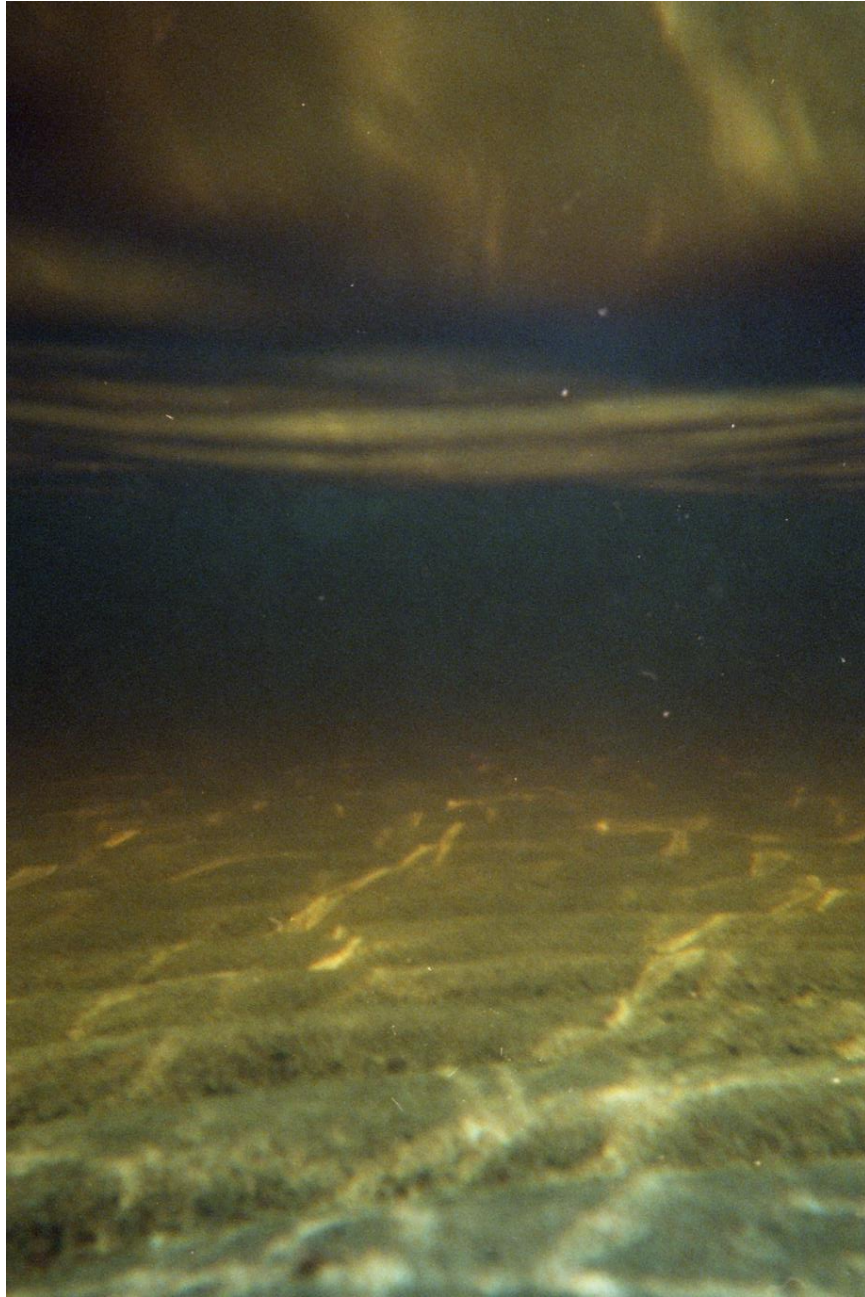


Image 3. From camera 66 by unknown participant. The motivation was to offer a pleasant task to facilitate observation/depicting of emotions and find new perspectives on place. This photograph also depicts the

"under the surface" feature of the narrative layers of places. Like in the Foucaultian heterotopia understanding, the history and stories cannot be seen on the first look, but affect the experience of a place and can be found when one is more deeply immersed into places.

Water mirrors the blue of the sky, but mixes the shade with sand.

The aim of this emotional mapping process was purely exploratory and the driver for it was framed by a greater curiosity about the playable qualities of places as potential game-changers in the perception of them.

Guideposts Along the Path

Participatory visual methodologies invoke stories which in turn can contribute, potentially, to changing stories and narratives (Mitchell, DeLange, & Moletsane, 2017) about important places. In art-based participatory activity, experience and knowledge are expressed by means of art (Leavy, 2009) and the collected imagery here was intended as a source of both research data and visual artistic pleasure. The arts are languages through which we think, communicate, and research and can be employed as forms of cultural critique (Norris, Bhattacharya, & Powell, 2020).

Even though one of the aims was to create a piece of art – an emotional map combining all the obtained images to be shown as artistic work by the author later on – this was not the driving force of the process. And as Jokela, Hiltunen, and Härkönen (2015) state, in art-based action research creating art does not exclude research, and vice versa. In art-based action research, the focus is not on developing one's own personal artistic expression but on the interaction between coartists, coresearchers and participants, and on having a sharing and empowering process for everyone involved. However, art-making is about engaging in a multisensory practice that is evocative and illuminative (Norris, Bhattacharya, & Powell, 2020) and that reveals aspects that we might not otherwise notice. The contribution of art to environmental research is related to its capacity to simultaneously show things and inspire reflection (von Bonsdorff, 2011, p.229).

The cyclical process of art-based action research usually starts with a place and community mapping, where the researcher-artist familiarizes themselves with the operating environment and various methods. This is followed by making action and art works, which can be defined as an intervention (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, pp.14–15). The intervention done in Ärjä was one part of the research cycles related to place perception and place empathy carried out by the author.



Image 4. From camera 2 by unknown participant. Suddenly noticing something new in yourself in relation to a place – how your hand communicates with the surroundings. Awakened in the sense of palmistry, that the lines in your hand match the paths of the place.

And eventually, we saw the blue sky!

This process also probes the feasibility of this kind of method for creative idleness (Hakala, 2018; Leppänen & Pajunen, 2019) and using the camera as an alibi (Deterding, 2018) for silliness or slacking, even though here the emphasis was more on inner vistas and reflections than just capturing moments of the festival. To account for their play, adults regularly resort to alibis, motivational accounts that deflect negative inference from their play behavior to their character. Adults account for play as serving their adult responsibilities, whether it serves communal cohesion or artistic expression (Deterding, 2018). When set-outsideness provides a frame and the potential and the ludic form provides the structure, ambiguity produces the meaning and experience of play (Sharp & Thomas, 2019).

The process was art-based action through play. This photo essay replies visually and gives support with traces of content analysis and semiotic approaches (Rose, 2016; Nöth, 2011; Pink, 2011) to understand samples of the image data obtained. What do we comprehend of the nature heritage location, nonartificial art festival and emotions experienced there just by gazing at the photographs? Photography should be understood as part of a continually shifting and emerging ecology of place where humans, the material, and the digital are increasingly entangled (Ingold, 2008, as cited in Hjort & Pink, 2014, p.47).



Image 5. From camera 35 by unknown participant. Liberated from your clothes! Surprising details in the landscape. Being liberated from your roles and clothes and escaping naked into the lake or the woods? Getting back to your roots and mother nature? There were several entries where cast aside clothes were left alone on the beach, banks and moss.

Blue jeans are casual, nakedness is natural.

This action was rooted in place attachment – the connection and emotional involvement between a person and a specific place (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001) and how emotional interaction with a place leads to satisfaction and attachment to that place (Altman & Low, 1992; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). The main interest of this explorative activity was in place empathy. As Zakharova (2018, p.31) defines it, place attachment occurs at an individual or group level, while place empathy is a highly personal experience based on the observer’s own imagination and personal narrative. According to Jensen (2016), empathy is an imaginative act that supports deep understanding of environmental knowledge and enhances sustainability awareness, the idea of understanding through feeling. Empathy is an emotional way of knowing and can be identified as an imaginative act: an emotive way of coming to know “the other” that may involve care and understanding.



Image 6. From camera 54 by unknown participant. Camera 54, solitude. Solitude in the landscape. The most impressive collection was the 86 images depicting being still, small, and alone in the landscape. The proportions of the world slip into their place again and the human can feel small in the lap of the forest.

Blue-grayness surrounds us and affects our moods and emotions.

The whole process was intertwined with the understanding of taking and reading images (Luukkonen, 2009; Kalha, 2016; Dyer, 2007; Suonpää, 2011), ambient photoplay (Heljakka, 2015; Hjort, 2016) and playful (Willmot, 2016) emotional mapping. The basis of the whole emotional mapping process is the fact that emotions and places are very much connected (Pánek & Benediktsson, 2017). Emotions are not conscious, but can be induced. Emotions create feelings, which supply the stimulus for action (Guazzaroni, 2013). According to Ahmed (2004, pp.9–11) emotions are related to materiality, so the materialized world includes forces that have effects on our emotions. Through emotions we are connected and relate to the world. Hjort and Pink (2014) define this kind of activity as emplaced visuality. It is about an embracing of photographs as a copresent part of movement through place. Emlaced visualities highlight the ways in which cartographies of the social, spatial, and geographical are being emplaced and entangled in new ways.

Entries

There were approximately 160 visitors during the Ärjä Art Festival on August 2-4 2019. A total of 96 disposable cameras were distributed to voluntary participants. At the end of the festival, after a weekend-long participatory art intervention, 82 cameras were returned. This number of cameras, each equipped with a 27-frame film, would technically mean 2,214 images, but some of the films were not fully used. Also, some frames technically failed, being totally black or white.

In the content analysis phase the images were distributed according to the themes:

Theme	Number of photographs	Notes
Buildings	88	Old buildings from the glory days of Ärjä Island. Silent decay and ruining of the buildings.
Camping	198	An essential experience while staying overnight at Ärjä. Resting together on the island, having your own space isolated by a tent or hammock. Is a forested island a public space and why do most of the participants choose to camp relatively close to each other, leaving the rest of the island empty? Is more socially accepted to be with the flock?
Details	390	Close-ups of reed, moss, heather, peeling paint, stones, rotten stubs, blueberries, feathers, pinecones and manmade miniature set-ups. Drawings made in sand. Having a closer look at the details and elements the island is made of. A dreamlike set of photographs of which many seem like portals to a parallel imaginary universe.
Dogs & other animals	46	When you have dogs around, who can resist them? In approximately every other photo the dog was being active, doing something: running, playing, carrying, sniffing. Also two snakes photographed seemed to be going somewhere.
Facial and body gestures	139	Posing for the camera and showing emotions through facial expressions (like smiling), body language (like cheering) or gestures (like thumbs-up).
Forest	109	The forest as it is: peaceful, stagnated, and deliberate. All the images transpire sempiternal serenity.
Nutrition	47	Eating, drinking and cooking on fire: part of the camping life experience. There is no fast food on an island without electricity. Preparing a meal transfers into a ritual. Images depict appreciating every bite and having a generous moment having something to eat.
Participation in art festival activities	280	Taking part in different activities of the Ärjä Art Festival. Even though most activities have a peaceful tempo (like yoga on the beach, tree breathing, listening to a radio play while wandering around the island), all these activities require active participation and/or following instructions.
Paths	67	Paths in the forests and on the shore. Quietly strolling along empty paths.
Sauna life	11	Bathing or preparing for a sauna. Bathing in the sauna or in lake was not the stagnation of a sauna experience. Images depicting the sanctity of the sauna reflected the idleness after bathing in the sauna.

Sheep	80	A herd of tame sheep stay on the island during the summer months. Encounters with them seemed to be an important part of the emotional journey. Watching the sheep grazing and ruminating is a way of meditation. Feeding and petting them is an idle activity as well.
Shoes, feet & footprints	46	Looking down at your feet and seeing your roots grow. Even though feet and shoes are a metaphor of activity and movement, this theme group seemed to depict a profound thought of rooting to a place and reflecting on the quiddity of one's existence. Due the ecological emphasis of the festival a number of these entries can also be seen as an allegory of the carbon footprint we cause.
Shore, skyline, water	311	Being surrounded by water makes the shore, water and staring toward the skyline the dominating entity in the visual material. Just being there. Staring at the skyline, waves and ripples. Shapes of the shore. Being part of the landscape and just blending in and disappearing into the scenery. Being there. Doing nothing.
Solitude in the landscape	86	A significant number of entries showed being alone in the landscape. The dust, scratches, and twisted colors of film cameras accentuate the dreamlike atmosphere of these images, which can be seen as a most significant entity depicting idleness and connection to the place.
Toward the sky	118	A significant number of pictures were taken toward the sky, from the worm's-eye view. That can be interpreted as lifting your thoughts to the heights, when there is no roof limiting, experiencing "ad astra" and letting your mind fly. It can also be portrayed as rendition of the relaxed pace of the location: the visitor has time to slow down, loll on the moss and watch the swaying of the crowns and forming of cloud creatures. Gazing up and seeing the sky through the tree crowns. You get connected to the place and the proportions of the world fall into place again. You hear insects rustle by your ear and understand their important role as well.
Total number of entries	2,016	

Table 1. Number of entries in each category after content analysis

Some of the themes depicted in the photographs were quite obvious. There are shabby buildings in the island waiting to be photographed and as the only way staying overnight is camping, and you are on a forest-covered island with sandy beaches, one can expect to receive high number of entries capturing what you see around you. As this playful mapping exercise took place during the Arjä Art Festival, there are also a number of entries recording the actual festival events and participation in them. Taking a closer look at the images and the atmosphere they reflect, the laid-back ambience is significantly present and tangible. Even though it was by no means prompted or intentionally encouraged, the imagery depicts a tranquil mood and can be seen as a collection of aesthetics of idleness and floating in shades of the color blue.



Image 7. From camera 82 by unknown participant. Departure and emotions. A mother can see only her child, not the place around, while the child is gazing out of the image toward the great unknown future.

The same shade of blue is in the water bottle and the lake and sky. Is it the same water in us and around us?

The following phase presented some examples of the imagery at Ärjä. The common denominator was chosen by the color. The remarks on each image are made by the author, founded on visual semiotics, but also taking on influences from surrealism (Kaitaro, 2015; Kalha, 2016) and weirdness, which is an essential dimension of artistic work and aesthetic experience and is not subject to normative truth assessment (Honkasalo, 2017). It also loosely adopts environmental aesthetics, which extends appreciation beyond art to the natural environment through an engagement with and sensory immersion in the natural world that privileges its aesthetic value (Waistell, 2015). At the same time, there was a quest for traces of the ambience of the past, experiencing the layered qualities of time and place. Like Morris (2014) suggests, every culture leaves marks for the future, a means of connecting the dots, of linking the past to what is yet to come. Perhaps with the photographs we can try to reach these dots. In order to understand the affects and emotions captured in the photographs, aspects of Lungström's (2020) ways to analyze were utilized: affective reading with empathy and imagination. As Lennon states, the perceived real has an imaginary texture (Lennon, 2015, p.52). Therefore, the analysis leaves space for the viewer's imagination as well, also allowing them to see the enchanted layers.

The world experienced by subjects within and alongside it: the reenchanting world. The meaning and value, which our modernist world accounts of the world claim to have removed, remains in the

enchantment of everyday experience. Such a world matters to us. It has salience and significance which renders intelligible, makes sense of our responses to it. (Lennon, 2015, p.11)



Image 8. From camera 2 by unknown participant. Camping life during the Ärjä Art Festival. Even though during the festival the weather conditions were most of the time harsh: rainy, windy and cold, the only possible way of staying overnight – camping – does not have to be a burden. Many of the images depict that it can be enjoyable and a way to reconnect with the wild. The camping equipment gives an excuse to be idle even during the daytime, despite the other people around you. These mediums create a private circle or respite which no one wants to disturb or break. Almost 200 entries depicted the camping experience, which shows that was a fundamental part of the overall emotional experience of Ärjä.

Camouflage if possible when you have green and blue camping equipment. You can be part of the forest or part of the sky.

All the participants agreed to the disclaimer (printed on the pick-up point and on each camera) that by returning the camera, they accept that photos on the films are free to be used in any means (artistic or research). It was mentioned on the disclaimer that each photographer should ask the persons in the photos that they are happy to be seen in this context. The original photographers cannot be traced, thus we have only the numbers of the cameras as the “names” of the photographers on the sample photos present. All the photographs included here were taken during the Ärjä Art Festival August 2019.

Analog and digital perception of time



Image 9. From camera 47 by unknown participant. Details to tell a story, a maze where you can get lost or a memory of a tree that once was here? What is left of the wisdom and glory? Rooted into the ground, yet looking like a comet, a star with a long tail: are the same shapes and images repeated across the universe in different surroundings?

Before turning into black soil, the metamorphosis has a phase of noble bluish gray.

The main trend in the photos is the dreamlike atmosphere that underlines the magical atmosphere of Årjä Island. This may occur because of the use of disposable film cameras that affect the colorscape. But perhaps also the medium turned out to be an emblem of time travel and allowed a slow tempo and reflective photography because the participants were not able to see the results instantly and they had only a limited number of frames to use. The toyish look of the cameras also encouraged a playful attitude towards the given mission: it is not hard or serious art, but a joyful and relaxed task – just play that anyone can take part in. Thus, this medium and practice emphasized the democratic aspect as well. The process of participatory art involves a democratic approach to the creation of art and invites participation in the creation of the message, rather than imposing and delivering a ready message to an audience. As such, the essentially democratic and egalitarian structures of participatory art can reinforce the aims of the movements (Flinders & Cunningham, 2014).



Image 10. From camera 62 by unknown participant. Blue. The sun finally revealed its beams of light and painted the whole landscape with a mysterious blue. It looks like scenery in a dream.

All we have is blue. The image is not manipulated, no filter has been used. The moment was blue, captured on film as it was.

The images produced during Ärjä Emotional Mapping show many scales and perspectives of place. They surprisingly reveal something we could also call the “Instagrammable qualities of a place,” but with a film camera no filter is required to catch the nostalgic atmosphere. It is just there, and there is nothing fake in a place like this. The medium may have also had an effect so that the visual data obtained had very few posing and “looking good” images, but plenty of profound, ambiguous and lyrical photographs. It seems that the majority of the photographs were not like the ones on social media for looking good and showing of, but more intuitive and meaningless. Nevertheless, it might have helped the whole process that people are used to sharing their experiences through social media: storytelling via images has been transformed into a habitude. As Hjort and Pink stated as early as in 2014, cameraphone photography has become part of the everyday reality and visuality of the people whose experiences they describe. Apps like Instagram invite images to be haunted by the analog, frozen in another time, while also being about the copresent moment as it happens. Mobile media users’ use of photography requires us to attend to the relationship between people, images, and environment; that is, to their situatedness in ecologies of place (Hjort & Pink, 2014, pp.43–46).

Using an old-fashioned film camera seemed to open up the willingness and senses toward the bygone stories the place is whispering and the emotions awakened by the heritage of the location. Idleness dressed in play endorsed participants to listen to the place, to see the treetops, sky, and details that they would normally pass by. With the experience of shared respite on the island, the participants exposed themselves to hear the stories whispering and experience emotional attachment and reconnection to nature.

Taking photographs in the form of an art-based playful task makes the participants become immersed in the place while seeking emotions, perspectives, and meanings. That enables them to envision the narrative layers of the place and facilitates reimagining its qualities.

Conclusions

Taking photographs with this method, there is also time to reflect and stay in solitude. Seclusion enables perspectives to be chosen and framing vistas to be revealed. Loitering with a mission generates the fathoming of new insights. The method encourages slow traveling, both identity- and community-building but preserving the environment at the same time. It is also a way of communicating values, nature, and heritage. Later on, when the resulting images are shared for the amazed gaze of the public, the imagery also attracts people to visit the location. Visual art-based participatory playful interventions like this in natural and cultural heritage locations can generate a valuable tool and method for destinations to succeed in balancing visitor flow and sustainability values. For visitors, it offers a medium that enables new seeing, reveals deeper layers of the place, and gives an excuse to behave differently, fool around and find playful qualities of place or just linger with the intention to find new perspectives. And for the spectators of the resulted images it offers a poetic reflection of emotions on an island designated by nature – and a premonition of aesthetic idleness. The power of the images, play, and deliberate reflection construct a forceful combination.

A significant number of entries (1,215, as shown in the content analysis table) were about people's actual relationship to the surroundings: showing qualities of place or revealing heterotopia, new angles and perspectives of place. It seems that this kind of prompting opens up the senses to the place and encourages observation. Using this kind of method for participatory activity followed by content analysis can offer future iterations for socially engaged art and visual practices. The gathered images are an immense source for interpretation, emotions, and ambiguity, but at the same time they constitute distinct paths to follow, like the blue path elucidating place empathy.

The changes in nature in recent years are alarming. At first it seems that using playful ways to tackle these challenges is an act of blasphemy. But inducing playful resilience can be the most insightful thing to do. As Heljakka (2020) states, "When there is a play, there is a way." The author would be inclined to continue this thought even further: when there is play, there is hope. We humans need all the possible ways to

evolve place empathy, and through creating positive visual engrams we might be able to change the perception of places.



Image 11. From camera 70 by unknown participant. Love, devotion, hugs. Intimacy, warmth, not minding the weather, taking care, enjoying the simple things of life. The warmth of coffee and holding your dear one tight.

In a blue coat, feeling slightly blue that your darling might have wet socks.



Image 12. From camera 61 by unknown participant. Love is in the air! All we need is love and empathy for places.

Two shades of blue, surrounded by 100 shades of blue.

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