

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PLAYING:

PLAYING WITH ROLES, PHOTOS, TEXTS, MEMORIES, CARDS, AND CO-PLAYERS

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Abstract

In this visual essay, I present some key thoughts that were essential for the birth of my visual-pedagogical installation *The Presence of the Absent—The Memory Game* (1998). This photo-installation is a playful window into my life; a constant trial to intertwine my multiple roles. Being a woman, a devoted art educator, a researcher, a wife, a friend, and a mother of three children, making art in my case means combining all of these aspects in my work. *The Memory Game* consists of 40 pairs of cards with photos and texts (see Figure 1). It plays with issues of growing up as a girl using photographs and memory work to explore the fugitive borderline between private and public.



Figure 1. An overview of the installation *The Presence of the Absent – The Memory Game*.

Beginning a Memory Game: Looking at a Family Photograph

Looking at an old family photograph makes me anxious. They say it is a picture taken of me. Is that really true: how would I know? I am a grown woman, not that tiny little girl in the photograph. I do not really remember what I looked like as a kid. And yet, there is something familiar to me in that girl. Suddenly I do recall having been standing there, in front of the playhouse trying to look proud of my new things. Yes, it is me, photographed by my father or his friend to show the gift and its happy owner. I will show you the photo (see Figure 2). I glue this picture on a cardboard and write on its back:

*”Me“ posing as gardener
in front of my new play house
in the backyard of our home
at the end of 1960’s.²*

This is a typical album text, telling you who, where and when did what. Is that all that needs to be told?

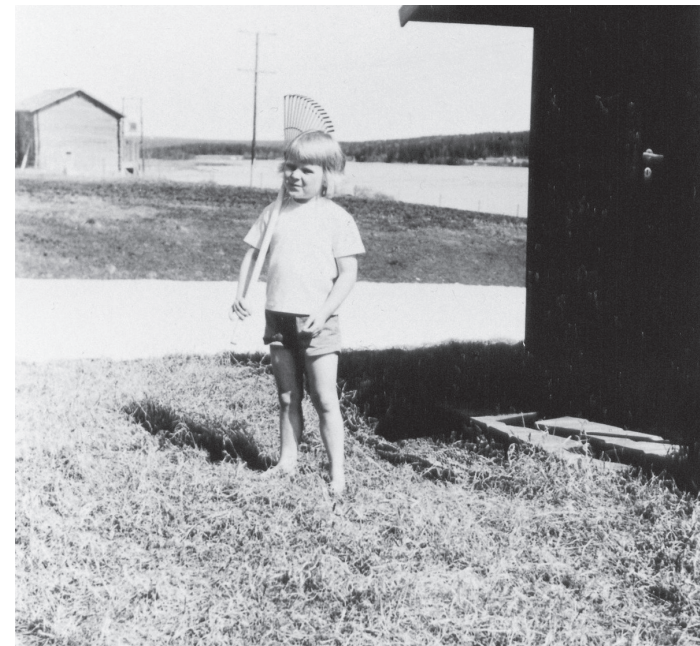


Figure 2. An old family photo showing ”me“ in front of my new playhouse.

Playing with Memories, Staging the Past—but Living the Present

Photo therapists, Jo Spence and Rosy Martin (1988/1995; also Spence, 1987/1995) developed a method of “staging” photos, which involves using the camera as a therapist to explore one’s past. I adapted this idea, and returned to the place depicted in a photograph, to my childhood village, to the backyard of the terrace house we used to live. There was no playhouse anymore. The landscape had changed. I asked my friend to take a photo of me standing there, posing as in the old photo (see Figure 3). I re-lived the childhood memory once again. I glued this photo, “the after-image,” on cardboard and wrote on its back my memory:



*“I was annoyed because
the playhouse was so
huge.
I did not show my
disappointment because
I knew
I should be grateful.”*

Figure 3. The about 30 years later staged “after-image” of the photo shown in Figure 2.

To remember these contradictory feelings, being glad for the gift but also disappointed and hiding this negative feeling, helped me to better understand my current self. This is because

*what is gone
goes on
in us*

*in me the one
I used
to be*

Have I always tried to avoid making visible the feelings that might hurt someone—at the same time forgetting that by doing so, I might also be hurt? Have I been honest to my parents so that they had a chance to really get to know me? Can I stand my own children being angry, disappointed, or crying?

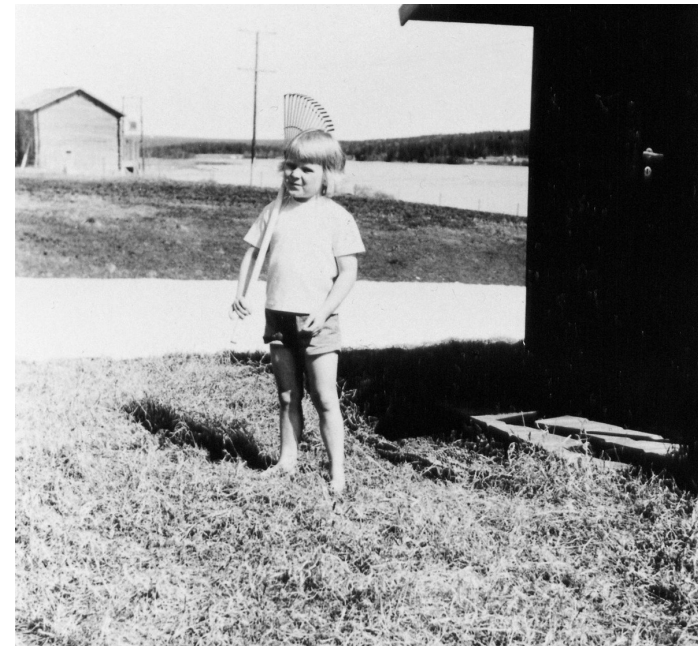
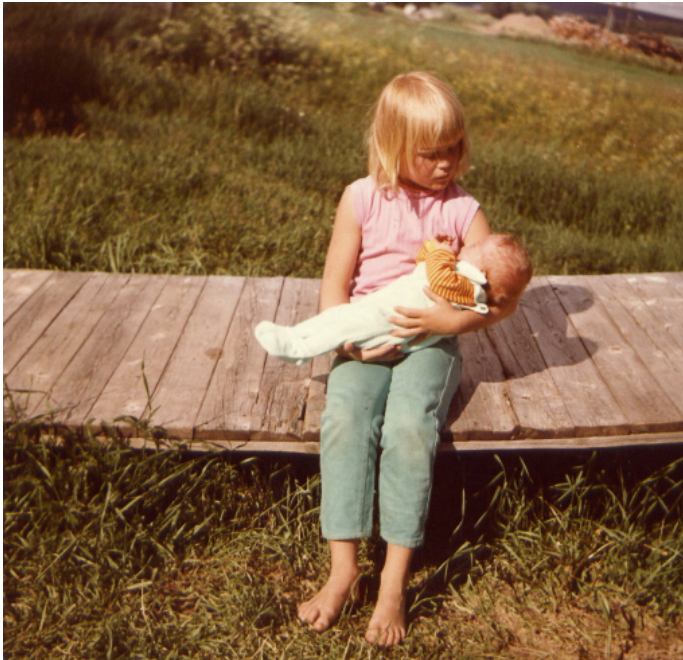


Figure 2 juxtaposed with Figure 3.

Constructing Photo Cards for the Game with Co-Players

I constructed a series of 40 pairs of cards starting with a childhood image and subsequent re-staging about 30 years later. I contacted family members and friends who were willing to help me. Creating the pictures for the game, the photo cards, also became a game, giving all of the participants a chance to get together. There was a lot of laughter, after all, imitating the old roles and experiencing their fugitiveness (see Figure 4).



Text below on the back of the photo above:

*“ ”Me“ holding my little brother Jukka in my arms
in the home-yard in the summer in 1970.”*

Figure 4. A pair of cards of the installation.



Text below on the back of the photo above, my memory:

“I saw a huge sheath-knife

Lapinleuku

at our neighbour.

At that moment my new-born

twin-brothers came to my mind.”

Challenging the Photos with Private Memories and Childhood Diary Entries

It is not only the memory but also text that creates the stories and fixes the meanings of photos. I wanted to show how contradictory the messages of family photos might be with the actual lived experiences (Kuhn, 1995). I decided not only to write my memories on the back of the cards, but also use some material from my childhood that could be considered more documentary.

I searched through authentic entries from my diary, which I wrote during the time when the photographs were taken that I was collaborating to re-stage. Being a typical adolescent girl, I kept a diary from the age of nine. On some of the cards that I placed on the back of the photos, I used quotations from my diaries from the time I lived in that tiny village before I was twelve years old. These quotations always have something to do with the childhood photo, but the connection may not be obvious, as they are based on my personal and private associations (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. A pair of cards of the installation.

Text on the back of the photo on left hand side:

*“ ”Me“ posing
on the bank of Mäkitiuras’
in a flower-field
according to the Summer girl-pictures
of the magazine
Apu in 1975.”*



Text on the back of the photo above,
a quotation from my diary:

*“28.2.1974
They asked me to ask Kari M
to write to them
as they don’t have guts to do it.
I may ask him to write to me as well.
That would be nice. I don’t know why. Adults
will of course think that an 11-year-old can not love anyone,
but that is a lie.
Of course one can not have such a deep feeling of love yet,
but anyway one can say one is loving somebody.
It would be nice, if Kari cared for me, or loved me.
Ah, love!”*

I have also purposefully tried to find texts that have something in common to females; text about those issues that are not often easy to speak out; issues of shame, taboos (see Figure 6). These included my earliest sexual memories, jealousy among sisters, violence in home education as well as joys and difficulties in building friendships.



Text on the back of the photo to the left:

“Marja is frying pancakes at the riverside sauna of the Mäkitiuras' at the summer camp of our girls' club called Rock Babies in 1975.”

Text on the back of the photo to the right, a quotation from my diary:

*“17.3.1974
She has got her first period last Tuesday. That is actually a good thing, as she is already 15 years and if you are 16 years and you have not got your periods yet you have to go to see a doctor.”*



Having already become a mother of two children, in the process of constructing the installation I also pondered about big issues, such as parenthood and my home education. The album text of one photo said:

“Father and ”me“ roasting sausages at a camp fire at the bank of the school in the middle of the 60’s.”

Yet the quotations from my childhood diary written on the back of the after-image told a different story:

*“5.1.1974
Today I DETEST, DESPISE my father. He beat me up.
Hit me, on my head so that I almost fainted and on my back so that I can hardly sit.
It was all TAINA’s fault.*

*6.1.1974
I have skied 2 km.
I am not AT ALL angry with my dad anymore.
But yesterday
I took it out on this diary.”*

Reading these texts reminds me also of my education stressing the fourth commandment. It seems I had all too well learned to try to respect my parents. Despite having become mistreated I tried to convince myself my father was right. Or did I really as child forgive him? I think I have always been filled with awe near him. But making this installation there was also the sweet fragrance of forgiving: as an adult, a mother, I confront my limits and dark sides and thus am ready to see my father with more tender eyes. However, I have learned from my past: with my children I have tried to make sure that if I have lost my temper, I have not gone that far. In case I have anyway gone “too far” I have shown that I have done wrong and apologized.

Figure 6. A pair of cards of the installation.

Pedagogical Visions: Sharing the Personal Playfully in Public

Jo Spence's work has encouraged me to bring my private life into a public arena, as "global economic crises cannot be separated from so-called personal crises" (Spence & Dennett, 1995, p. 219). To name things may be a start to changing things (Figure 7). To start the change in oneself is the first step toward changing the world.



Text on the back of the photo—left hand side.

*“The vigorous ”me“
holding a saw
in the summer in 1975
near the shed.”*

Text on the back of the photo on the right hand side, my memory:

*“In the elementary school
I was chubby
and in the upper grades
of the comprehensive school
anorectic.”*



Figure 7. A pair of cards of the installation.

What importance is there in naming things? I, for example, as a grown-up have understood myself having been pretty anorectic in my youth. That word was not used when I was a teenager. In recent years it has become such a widely spread concept. I remember being teased because of my chubbiness and having decided to change myself totally when going to the upper grades of the elementary school. I succeeded in losing weight—and lacking menstruation until I was by the school nurse “forced” to gain more weight. I have gone through some therapy later in my life. But I hope that as the problem is nowadays more recognized, people get help more often. I get anxious as I sometimes hear my tiny girls talking about their weight or being too fat. I try to keep calm and convince them how dear they are just as they are. But I fear in my heart that they are not convinced enough, that problems will appear the model of Twiggy still being all around representing the ideal.

To make the cards available for public, I had to find a way to make them lasting so that it would be all right to touch them. I decided to laminate them. They started to look as four-cornered plates in my eyes. I wanted to put them on show on tables. To make the scene more aesthetic, I first placed the white tablecloths on the tables. So, the cards are served as a dinner whereas the tablecloths changed the atmosphere towards a gala (See Figure 1). Instead of dinner settings, pairs of cards lay beside each other so that the viewer may start indulging where (s)he wants. (S)he may turn the cards and play with the different combinations of texts and images. Here my childish attitude to life and teaching becomes real. *The Memory Game* installation is a visual-pedagogical production, which by my rules has to have a sense of playfulness. Viewers are enticed by an association with card playing to touch the work, to move the cards, to make her/his own interpretations and interact in personal ways with the memory game. They may play with their own rules:

*our memory shuffles
the picture cards of the game of life*

*why ask
who will be
the winner*

One of my pedagogical aims for my productions is to challenge the viewer to think about their own family photography. I consider them being kind of visual lectures. As an art educator, I want to get the viewers involved, so I also welcome written feedback. Signage asks visitors to write about the thoughts and feelings the work has aroused. If they take a little time to make personal associations as written response, we start a dialogue. I believe that personal reflection helps to better understand oneself (see Räsänen, 1997).

Exploring Difficult Memories through Dialogue and Laughter

The Memory Game is one of the four installations dealing with the genre of family photography I have constructed doing my research.³ In my dissertation I have analyzed the responses I gathered from these installations (Ulkuniemi, 2005, 2007). I sought to understand the kind of dialogues they inspired and enhanced. I read the responses in light of the themes I had had in mind while constructing the visual-pedagogical productions. The themes of *The Memory Game* included according to the name how a photograph makes present the absent (the past, the dead ones); sharing the private publicly; and constructing identity with memory work. *The Memory Game* was shown and the feedback, 328 responses, was gathered during the years 1998-2003 in Finland (in: an old school building, a private home, a gallery, a university classroom, an art museum), in Germany (in a church) and in Spain (in a university hall).

In short, the responses for *The Memory Game* dealt with issues of private made public. Some visitors found the act of sharing very important: it helped them to deal with difficult memories and shame, to understand there are other people with similar problems. Others felt that looking into a stranger's life was embarrassing (See Figure 8).



“I surprised father and mother in the middle of the night in their bedroom when I was playing with my camera in 1975.”



“I threw a stone at our neighbour's son. His mother gave me a spanking in my parent's bedroom.”

Figure 8. A pair of cards of the installation with text on the back of the photos.

Many viewers started to ponder their own childhood. Some people decided to think about new ways to use their family photos and take new ones in a new manner. The special character of a photograph, to freeze time, was widely discussed in responses dealing with the visible changes shown in the pairs, especially the pairs in which the presence of the absent became clear (see Figure 8). One viewer who had lost a loved one felt pain; another did not feel at all touched by the theme of death but felt angry because of my “putting it to every place”⁴ (a quotation translated from a Finnish response in Rovaniemi’s art museum). A feedback note from a student at the University of Granada may sum up the variety and personal depth of responses:

(...) It was impressive to see the photos of your mother who is not later (in the photos) anymore. I think you have to be very brave to make this. I could not ever do it as I would start crying immediately. (Translated from Spanish.)

And yet, despite all the crying, there was also a happier tone in some responses. Some people started to giggle, some even felt themselves younger because of this relaxing exercise. To be able to laugh, not to others but to oneself and with others, may empower us to overcome difficulties. Empowerment by laughter, could that be something important?

(see Figure 9.)



Text on the back of the photo on left hand side:

“ ”Me“ posing with my bike in my home yard in 1975. In the background there is the house of Kallunkis’ and some hay on stakes.”

Text on the back of the photo on the right hand side, a quotation from my diary:

*“14.2.1974
The exercising card
is filled with
ticks, tral-lal-lei!
This previous sentence
I have invented myself.
Unfortunately it does not
hold
good in my case. I have got
only/one (!) tick in my card.”*



Figure 9. A pair of cards of the installation.

Not the Final

In conclusion, this photo exhibition game was a powerful way to engage viewers with the artist and with their own lives. Sharing both joys and sorrows is one way women have traditionally shared community. Here the generation of my mother represented in the old photos encounters today's female in the reenactments. Similarly, insights arise about generational perspectives of notions of maleness in the re-staged photos by the actors, re-enacting a former self, as well as those viewing the pictures. According to the responses, women seem to be able to recognize themselves easily in other's life stories. There seems to be shared processes of turning from a girl to a woman.

But this installation did not only talk about womanhood. My intention as an art educator was to engage people to view the family photograph with new eyes. Some viewers stated this happened. Unfortunately for me dealing so many years with family photography, in my profession as an artist, meant that I lost my aptitude to take snapshots. So there is a huge blackout in my family album memory.

What I am especially happy about as an art educator—and researcher as well, of course—is that so many viewers did take time to sit down and write a response. Probably it was partly due to the familiar material of the work, snapshots. Everyone has them and knows them. I also want to think that my will to be open, to give of myself, helped the viewers to give of themselves. It always takes two to dialogue, and trust.

As a researcher I found a new way to present my findings, that is, to show in the form of installations some things I found through literature review. I also gathered my data using these visual-pedagogical productions. Especially during the time of research I found my role as a wife essential: without the help and support of my husband I would never have

been able to cope with all the challenges I had to confront. Also having so many good friends helping me in the process—from the beginning being there to be photographed to the end of letting me show their photos to the public—made me convinced of the power of co-operation and friendship.

What issues arose concerning my role as a mother? I think this process has helped me to understand my parents better, especially my father who has been a little distant. Forgiving him made us closer. I also had a chance to go through the grieving for my deceased mother. Playing with past memories helped to cure some losses and inner wounds. I could relive some of my childhood memories and ponder about what felt essential in life at that time. Maybe this empathy will help me to become a little bit better mother.

All in all, via this project I became convinced that family photos are something we can use in art education for many different purposes. We only have to be careful with the security of privacy when dealing with people's personal images. I am inviting you to join me in this continuing process of creating new ways to play with photos, texts, and memories. Thank you for already having started by having interaction with this essay.

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Endnotes:

1. After getting acquainted with the idea of memory work method developed by Frigga Haug and her group of women (1992), which stresses the importance of writing about one’s past using (s)he-pronoun, I started to use inverted commas around the word ”me“. ”Me“ refers to the person depicted in the photo. As I am looking at a photo taken of ”me“, I do not see ”me“ but her, the one I once was.

2. This quotation from the card, as well as all the other quotations, aphorisms and photos connected with my installation, have been previously published in Finnish on the cd-rom attachment of my dissertation (Ulkuniemi, 2005).

3. The other three installations are *The Enchanted Carpet of the Holy Daily Life*, *The Reproduction*, and *Mothers’ Winter Garden*.

4. The comment in Finnish prior to translation is ”Kun sitä oli tungettu joka paikkaan.”

About the Artist

Seija Ulkuniemi is Doctor of Arts (Art & Design) and Master of Education. Since 1997 she has been working as senior lecturer in art education at classroom teacher training in the University of Lapland. She has also worked as professor in art education for a year.

She designs and teaches courses in the fields of art pedagogy, the means of picture making, media education as well as knowledge of art (art history). Her work also includes mentoring the first year and the final practice of the prospective classroom teachers.

Her motto is: ”See your own worth, and give value also to your neighbour.” Her main aim in teaching is to be able to act as a catalyst, creating the conditions for growing as a person/teacher. Thus the students have a chance to find and create something new (in themselves, in others and in world around them, including art) in a safe atmosphere that respects personal diversity.

She has written several articles and given many lectures about art pedagogy and family photography. Some of her papers presented in InSEA-congresses have also been published in English. She has been participating in university teacher exchange in Norway, Iceland, Great Britain, Spain, and United States of America.

She has been active in making art, especially installations involving photographs, since year 1996, when her first installation dealing with family photography *The Enchanted Carpet of Holy Daily Life*, was exhibited.

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