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"It's as if…" Preschoolers Encountering Contemporary Photography

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Abstract

This article reports a study on an encounter between preschoolers and contemporary photography. The article has two aims: first, it elucidates preschoolers' meaning-making when viewing photographs, and second, it investigates the possible benefits of using contemporary photography as a forum for prompting children's aesthetic agency in early childhood education. This article is based on a qualitative case study that draws on childhood studies, research in art education and visual cultural studies. The data was produced in a photography workshop in a Finnish daycare center in autumn 2014 during which children both viewed contemporary photographic art and took photographs themselves. The article reports on preschoolers' accounts of contemporary photography studied by applying discourse analytic thinking. In contrast to earlier research findings, the article elucidates diversity and flexibility in the preschoolers' accounts and their aesthetic agency expressed in both individual and collective meaning-making.

Photography and Children

Today photographs are taken and shared more than ever before. In Western societies children take part in digital photographic practices from a very early age by shooting, gazing at and sharing framed images. Children's social life is increasingly saturated by digital devices, which open up possibilities for them to interact with and explore the surrounding world or watch it as a bystander. These various media bring multiple, rapidly transforming and tempting imagery within the everyday visual environment of children. Our visual cultural surroundings also teach us what to look at and how to see. In this article, I focus on an encounter between a class of preschoolers[1] (six-year-olds) and contemporary photographic art by examining how the children made sense of photographs viewed in a specially organized workshop.

Photographs *taken by children* have been studied in diverse disciplines including education, social science and psychology. In this research, photographs are used as a child-friendly[2] way of collecting data from the perspectives of children, including soliciting their views and hearing their voices (e.g., Böök & Mykkänen, 2014; Zartler & Richter, 2012; Yamada-Rice, 2010; Cook & Hess, 2007; Rasmussen, 2004; De Marie, 2001). The photo elicitation interview (Tinkler, 2014; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), photo narration (Crane, 2012) and photo-voice (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Burke, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997) are methods that use photography as a way of addressing issues relevant to children. Photographs in these contexts are seen as research tools, enhancing the depth of research data and enriching participants' verbal descriptions (Burles & Thomas, 2014). Photos can also work also as teasers (Zartler, 2014) or icebreakers (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel, 2006) to assist respondents in an interview situation.

Studies which concentrate exclusively on *how children perceive and understand* photographs, be it photos taken by themselves or by professionals, have not been a research focus in the fields of visual cultural studies and art education. This is surprising in light of debate on the importance of visual literacy in education (e.g., Baylen & D´Alba, 2015; Vermeersch & Vandenbroucke, 2015) and the weight given to the interpretation of an image in photography research (Price & Wells, 2009). However, in developmental psychology, the reception skills of children along with their aesthetic understanding of photographic art have been investigated, as well as their preferences and responses regarding photographs taken by

[1] Finnish preschool is obligatory for six-years-old children before they enter school in the year of their seventh birthday.
[2] See Samantha Punch (2002) for critical reflection of the use of special, 'child-centered' methods.

themselves (Liben, 2003; Liben & Szechter, 2002; Szechter & Liben, 2007).[3]

Although research on children as viewers of photographs is scarce, children's interpretations of other forms of visual art have been widely studied (Brittain, 1979; Steinberg & DeLoache, 1986; Parsons, 1987; Callaghan & MacFarlane, 1998; Callaghan, 2000; Freeman & Parsons, 2001). It is notable that in these studies contemporary art is poorly represented. There is also a lack of research on contemporary art and preschool-aged audiences. However, the studies that exist on children as recipients of visual art have come to the same conclusion: young children prefer realistic works of art and focus mainly on the subject matter and on the referential aspects of an image in their interpretations, rather than the aesthetic-formal qualities or technical solutions of the images (Parsons, 1987; Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988; Freeman, 1995; Sharples, Davidson, Thomas & Rudman, 2003; Liben & Szechter, 2002; Szechter & Liben, 2007).[4] Moreover, children's focus on the subject matter is usually considered to be a referent-based reaction, and thus an undeveloped way of understanding an image, whether a painting or a photograph. According to Lynn S. Liben (2003), interpreting photographs can be seen as a developmental process through which the viewer begins to understand the symbolic nature of representation and that the photograph's surface entails more than denotative information about the referent. Instead of focusing solely on *what* is represented, one starts to look at *how* the subject matter is represented.

Consistent with the earlier research, and with reference to my own data, I agree that preschoolers tend to focus on the subject matter. However, in this article I will look more closely at, what precisely is included in the act of concentrating on the subject matter when viewing contemporary photography. Unlike the earlier research (Liben, 2003; Szechter & Liben, 2007; Setälä, 2012), I do not examine whether preschoolers prefer to inspect the subject matter or are more interested in formal-aesthetic features (e.g., composition, color, style) or technical solutions (e.g. framing, lighting, viewing angle, use of filters) in their meaning-making process. Instead I consider the above-mentioned elements as an indivisible unity in a photograph, which preschoolers address in their accounts. I suggest that while concentrating on the subject matter presented in a photograph a preschooler can also express her personal impressions, formulate motives, connect the photograph to her own life experiences, relate to its aesthetic aspects and at the same time construct a joint activity in her peer group.

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[3] For earlier research on children as recipients of photographs in psychology, see e.g., O'Connor et al. 1981; Kose, 1985; Zaitchik, 1990; DeLoache et al., 2003.

[4] Päivi Setälä (2012), however, concludes that preschoolers also pay attention to aesthetic-formal aspects such as composition, lighting and framing. See also Winston et al. (1995) for views on children´s sensitivity to the expression of emotions in drawings.

Next, I introduce the theoretical starting point of the study, namely, aesthetic agency and discuss contemporary art as a forum for cultural participation. I then describe the production of the data in the contemporary photographic workshop and introduce the methodological approach. After this, I present my analysis of the preschoolers' accounts along with examples from the data. The article concludes with a summary of the findings and discusses them in relation to the theoretical framework of the research in order to offer an overview of preschoolers as viewers of contemporary photography.

Aesthetic Agency and Contemporary Art

The debate on children's agency is multidisciplinary and diverse. Agency is an established concept in, among others, social studies, educational research and art education. In art education, in education in general, and in childhood studies there is a tension between seeing agency either as a child's inherent capacity or considering it as a socially constructed and relational phenomenon. While these two conceptualizations of agency are not necessarily mutually exclusive, certain differences in emphasis can be noticed between the above-mentioned approaches.

The traditions of creative self-expression[5] and Modernist art education in Western societies have held up a model of a child that assumes a detached subject, individual agency and self-expression (Tobin, 1995; Efland, 2007; McClure, 2011a; Sunday, 2015). According to this model the child's original and unprejudiced views, new creating mind and capacity for bold expression should be celebrated and protected from the ready-made adult worlds. Thus these traditions of art education lean on the notion of agency as individual and innate in a child.[6]

When considering agency as shared activity, it is seen as a relational phenomenon which is constructed, tested and manifested in social interaction (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö & Mikkola, 2014). According to Berry Mayall (2002), a*n actor* acts in accordance with her subjective wishes whereas *an agent* negotiates with other people and constructs a joint activity with them in order to make a difference. Agency, then, is something one has to accomplish, something that, requires constant negotiations and the eliciting of other people's views. It is a

[5] The roots of Finnish early childhood visual art education lie in the traditions of creative self-expression and Fröbelian crafts (Rusanen, 2007; Varto, 2013). Even today these traditions, alongside pragmatic views of art (Rusanen & Ruokonen, 2011), form a recognizable core in Finnish daycare center practices.

[6] In contrast, recent socio-cultural views of art education have emphasized the social processes in the making of art (e.g. sharing, co-operation) and considered children's culture as an important resource for communication and cultural capital among the peers (Sunday, 2015; Thompson, 2003, 2006). Also in contemporary art, efforts have been made to move beyond the individual and embrace dialogue and collaborative action as aspects of the creative process (Gyotte et al., 2015). See also Bourriaud, 2002.

context-bound and interdependent, occasional and dynamic process (Esser, Baader, Betz & Hungerland, 2016; Kumpulainen et al., 2014) and hence never complete.

The concept of agency in this article draws on both of the above definitions: on the one hand, I see agency as a special way of expressing oneself and influencing an ongoing action, and on the other hand, as a process requiring interaction and dialogue with other people. Here, I use the concept of *aesthetic agency* (von Bonsdorff, 2015b), which is based on the idea of a child's inherent way of experiencing, practicing imagination and situating herself in the surrounding world as a multimodal, expressive and corporeal being[7]. Aesthetic agency can be described as openness to the world, addressing it in a sensuous, improvisational and play-like way (von Bonsdorff, 2009; 2015b). Instead of straightforward, rational and dynamic operationality, the concept of agency can thus also refer to the capacity to influence, transform or carry forward a flow of actions, in subtler, more context-sensitive and intuitive ways (Paju, 2013; von Bonsdorff, 2015b; Rainio, 2010). Here, it is important to notice that in the visual arts aesthetic agency can be manifested both in the making of an art work and in the reception and interpretation of it.

Pauline von Bonsdorff (2015b) considers aesthetic agency as an existentially necessary practice in childhood. Being a narrator, creating a life-world and making oneself visible in it can give pleasure and a sense of power to a child in circumstances organized and supervised mainly by adults. According to Anna Pauliina Rainio (2010), the ability to improvise and to imagine alternative ways and different realities can be seen as crucial for the sense of agency and necessary for questioning the given culture and society. However, no one is an aesthetic agent alone. Aesthetic agency is social and intersubjective in its nature (von Bonsdorff, 2015b, 2015a). In creative activities such as narratives and fantasy plays, children often work collectively (Puroila, Estola & Syrjälä, 2012a; Corsaro, 2005). While doing this they position themselves socially, articulate their relationships appropriately and translate meanings between their individual life worlds and those of others (von Bonsdorff, 2015b).

Although the creative and self-expressive, tribal child (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) is no stranger to Western aesthetics and art history on the metaphorical level, children have not been taken seriously as cultural subjects, experiencing art (von Bonsdorff, 2005; 2015b). In early childhood contexts, contemporary art often awakens censorship and concern among adults. These well-meaning, protective acts can also lead to the shutting down of possibilities

[7] See Kinnunen's and Einarsdottir's (2013) views on young children's holistic and embodied way of living and aesthetic experiencing. See also Puroila et al. (2012a) on notion of children's multimodal expression in their narratives.

for children's cultural participation (McClure, 2011a, 2011b; Thompson, 2003).

In this article, preschoolers are seen as an interesting and diverse audience whose views of contemporary photography are considered as ways to participate in discussion pertaining to different themes and phenomena in current society. Thus, preschoolers' views are not studied in accordance with the assumptions of developmental or cognitive psychology as less mature or undeveloped, as it is done in the earlier research concerning young children's reception skills and aesthetic understanding of visual art, including photographs (e.g. Parsons, 1987; Liben, 2003; Szechter & Liben, 2007).[8] Instead, this article reports research which draws on the childhood studies' views of children as competent meaning makers, creative social actors and capable of influencing and contributing to the cultures they live in (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Corsaro, 1997).

The process-like, interactive and multisensory nature of contemporary art[9] is favorable to multiple kinds of interpretations. Therefore, it is apt to describe contemporary art as an event of communication rather than an object (von Bonsdorff, 2005). The child's innate multimodality, her readiness and ability to play, to combine and crisscross contexts can thus be seen as strengths, as appropriate tactics in approaching contemporary art.

Contemporary Photography Workshop in a Daycare Center

For my research I implemented a photography workshop in a Finnish daycare center with the aim of creating a meeting point for preschoolers and contemporary art.[10] The preschool class comprised 14 children, of whom 12 joined the first session of the workshop studied for this article. Two of the class educators were also present, and they assisted me and the children when needed. The workshop started by viewing 13 photographs by Finnish[11] contemporary artists (see Appendix 1). In the second session, inspired by the photographs preschoolers had seen, they took photographs themselves. The children's photographs were later presented and discussed in groups of 2-4 children. After eight sessions (October-November 2014), two

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[8] In his aesthetic-cognitive model Michael Parsons (1987) names preschool-aged children's developmental stage as one of *beauty and realism* [italics added], where a work of art is preferred if the subject is attractive and if the representation is realistic. See also Lynn S. Liben (2003) for progressive competencies in understanding external spatial representations.

[9] Contemporary art is considered in this article as visual arts' phenomenon born in 1970's (see Sederholm, 1998). It is notable though that in Finland photography's breakthrough as a legitimate form of contemporary art did not occur until 1990's (Suonpää, 2012).

[10] Before starting the workshop I sought a written permission from the children's parents for their children's participation and an oral consent from the children themselves. The participants were assured that the children, their families and the daycare center would remain anonymous in the final research report.

[11] Choosing only Finnish artists' photographs was due to copyright issues.

exhibitions of the children's photographs were organized, one in the daycare center and the other in a national event of children's culture. All the workshop's sessions were audio-video recorded.

The photographs which were viewed in the workshop represented a stylistic variety of contemporary photographic art. They included works that were staged, digitally manipulated, documentary in their style and in the form of snapshots. The themes of the photographs dealt with issues prominent in contemporary photographic art[12], including identity, otherness, relation to the environment/nature, play and humor, media culture and the relation between image and conceptuality. I also chose a few photographs representing children on the assumption that they might engage the preschoolers' interest.

It was made clear to the children from the beginning that their participation was voluntary, and that if they so wished they could withdraw from the viewing session at any point. The session lasted 1 hour 15 minutes and took place in a darkened room where the photos were projected in large size on the wall with the preschoolers sitting in two rows facing the white screen. We agreed that when children wanted to say something, they would raise their hands. During the workshop, I decided to informalize this school class setting by moving around and sitting with children and encouraging them to talk to one another instead of directing their comments to me. In spite of these efforts, the conversation took usually the form of (1) a child's comment, (2) my question/comment and (3) a child's answer. When unprompted and more narrative talk appeared, the raising of hands was usually forgotten, the pace of talk quicken, and I could withdraw from the discussion.

To encourage children's aesthetic agency, I tried to guide their comments as little as possible. The aim of the workshop was not to teach. I emphasized to children that I was very interested to know what preschoolers would think about the photos and that everyone was entitled to her/his own opinion. A child could participate in the viewing session by commenting or just by watching the photos. I was happy, nevertheless, to notice from the recorded audio-video-material, that every child in the group made at least three accounts during the viewing session.

The children's interests guided the pace at which we proceeded; however, I noticed that if I allowed the situation to continue without making any comments or asking questions the children appeared to feel rather anxious. Hence, I saw it as crucial for the success of the viewing situation that I engaged with the children's accounts, went along with their enthusiasm and puzzlements, including facial expressions, gestures and intonation, and

[12] See Suonpää (2012) and Wells (2009) for themes in contemporary photography.

laughed with them. My role was anything but a detached observer's. In doing this, I was blurring the boundary between an adult researcher and children as 'data producers'. This also presented me with a challenge: how to be intensively present, join in and construct a mutually involving session and yet not guide the children's actions to accord with my research interests. In a group of 12 children, I also had to make compromises, as the children's capacity to concentrate on each other's accounts varied. This meant that I occasionally had to end a rambling explanation, even if from a researcher's perspective it would have been valuable to listen to it to the end.

Analyzing Preschoolers' Accounts as Discourses

In this article, I approach both contemporary photography and preschoolers' accounts of it as discourses, that is, as culturally constructed representations producing and reproducing social reality. Here, discourse is understood broadly, and includes visual, tactile, aural and other sensory modalities. Within this definition, discourse covers facial expressions and gestures as well as words and utterances. (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001; Wetherell, 2012.)[13] An account is defined as a multimodal way of explaining and making oneself understandable to other people. Instead of merely reflecting a given reality, accounts are seen to construct a certain version of it and studied in relation to the aesthetic agency. Of particular note is that in analyzing preschoolers' accounts I use the concept *making sense* as it is a more appropriate description of how preschoolers encounter photographs than *interpretation*, which has connotations of a more analytical and contemplative process of meaning-making[14].

In doing research with children one has to take into consideration various generational issues concerning the child-adult -relationship (Mayall, 2002). The researcher's assumptions and expectations about children and their abilities all influence her perceptions, and the interpretations she makes in producing and analyzing the data (Punch, 2002; Pink, 2013; Christensen & James, 2008). Drawing on the theoretical framework of this research, I consider preschoolers as an audience for art, whose accounts merit serious consideration and appreciation. Therefore, in the present analysis I apply neither specific preconceptions on the aesthetic-cognitive capabilities of preschool-aged children, nor on the formal aspects of an

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[13] In the verbatim transcription (in Finnish) of the audio-video, I took into account the children´s (and my own) holistic means of expression and marked down gestures, movements, facial expressions, pauses, sighs and laughter to give an encompassing description of the viewing situation and its interaction. My analysis thus includes both verbal and nonverbal modes of expression.

[14] Richard Shusterman (2000) speaks of immediate *understanding* [italics added] of an artwork instead of interpretation and refers to an activity, which is corrigible, perspectival, pluralistic and engaged in an active process. Understanding is then something which is prior to and grounds for interpretation. Interpretation in turn enlarges, validates or corrects understanding.

image, for example, principles of image analysis or visual semiotics. Instead, I apply a data-driven approach.

It is obvious that preschoolers do not produce their accounts in a vacuum. Preschoolers' personal and shared history, their peer cultures, and their earlier experiences in viewing, taking and discussing photographs and other visual orders in their surroundings, all influence their meaning-making in a particular viewing situation, in this case one organized and set up by a new adult. It is also notable that photographs are a cultural and social practice per se and a known convention in conveying and constructing meanings, including among young children (Setälä, 2012; Sharples et al., 2003). In photography research, *antiessentialism*[15] (Seppänen, 2002) emphasizes the contractual and situational nature of interpretation; that is, a photograph's meaning is constructed within the cultural practices and contexts where the photo is produced, interpreted and used, and thus its meaning is occasional and it varies.

In the discourse analysis, talk is studied as doing, as acts and deeds (Suoninen, 2016). My data shows, that while making sense of the photographs, the preschoolers also convince, support and entertain each other, adapt to each other's views, compete with each other, negotiate and create like-mindedness. These acts I will introduce in the analysis. Although I do not use conversation analysis, to highlight the nature of interaction in the viewing session, I note the preschoolers' turn takings, their initiatives and ways of dealing with the tension between differing opinions.

I consider preschoolers' accounts as manifestations of aesthetic agency and examine how the aesthetic agency is constructed in them. As a result of a close reading of the transcribed text and listening to the audio-video -recorded material several times, I have divided preschoolers' accounts into two thematic groups: (1) individual and collective sense making and (2) multimodal and interactive play. Yet it is important to notice, that this division is not mutually excluding. To develop a preliminary understanding of the data, in the analysis I first paid attention to the overall nature and contents of the preschoolers' accounts. Next, I identified features which were distinctive and regular in the data and examined what connections they might have to the concept of aesthetic agency. The results showed multimodality, expression of subjective impressions, play-like testing of ideas and imaginative construction of possible

[15] This theoretical approach has its roots in British Cultural Studies, in New Art History (e.g. Tagg, 1988) and in later British and American photography research (see Spence, 1995; Solomon-Godeau, 1991) and it treats meaning-making as a process which is not dictated solely by the photographer, or the photograph's formal aesthetic qualities or by the viewer's expectations, experiences and knowledge. Instead, all these elements are seen to intertwine in the interpretation process, which in turn, is bound to historical and cultural contexts and their conventions.

worlds as salient features in the preschoolers' meaning-making. I also became aware of the children's interest in details and their ways of treating the photograph as a visual riddle.

The presentation of the findings includes data excerpts of the accounts presented in the discussion of the following five photographs (Figures1-5). I chose to introduce these five specific photographs out of thirteen, because the discussions they provoked, exemplify the salient features of the preschoolers' accounts.

Figure 1. Marja Pirilä (2013). *Camera Obscura/Alvar and Erik, Rovaniemi.* Reprinted with permission.

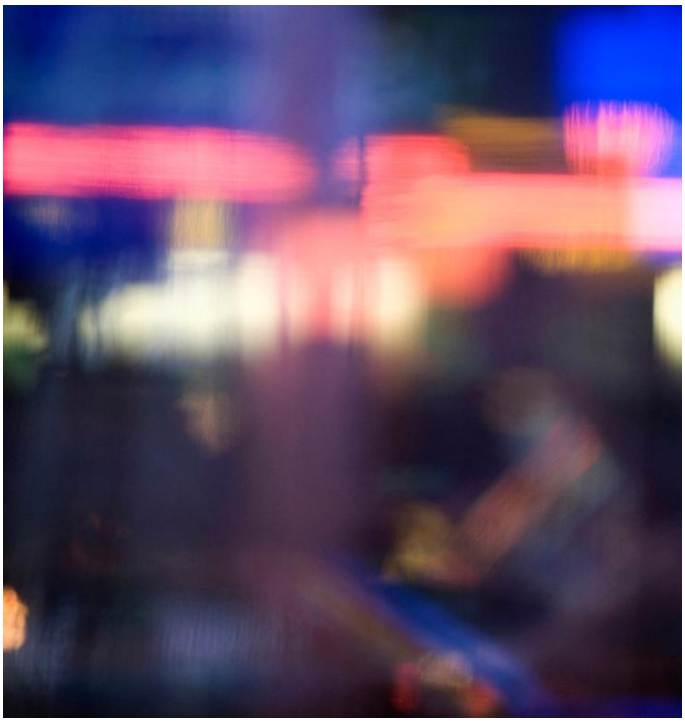

Figure 2. Ea Vasko (2009). *#3 from series Reflections of the ever-changing.* Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3. Julius Koivistoinen (2011). *Kontula, Helsinki*. *#9 from series Terrarium, Everyday paradise*. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 4. Riitta Ikonen & Karoline Hjorth (2011). *Eyes as Big as Plates # Agnes I.* Reprinted with permission.

Figure 5. Johanna Hackman (2006-10). *Utan oss. Ilman meitä [Without Us]*. Reprinted with permission.

Aesthetic Agency as Individual and Collective Sense Making

Preschoolers' accounts comprised both individual impressions and collective, co-constructed sense making. The individually expressed accounts of photographs could be presented side by side as independent parts of a collage of thoughts and feelings. In the collective sense making, several preschoolers worked together to create a mutual storyline of the photograph, with a sense of continuity and coherence in it. Like in a mutual play, in making sense of a photograph in a group situation, the participants had to interact in creative ways, bringing in new ideas, unraveling earlier ones and changing the course of the interpretation as they went along (see von Bonsdorff, 2005).

According to Szechter and Liben (2007) the way young children describe a photograph's subject matter is mostly concrete, literal and relatively objective, while subjective comments are rare. In my data, the preschoolers' accounts not only included objective naming but also impressions and feelings that the subject of the photograph had engendered in them. The majority of the preschoolers' accounts started with phrases like "it's as if…", "it feels like…" and "it seems as if…"

In the excerpt below[16], the children are viewing *Alvar and Erik* by Marja Pirilä (Figure 1, 2013). In the first utterance Minttu[17] focuses on the subject matter by describing her impression of what the two persons in the photo might do next. For Minttu the photograph indicates something which is about to happen, and she is making sense of it. Minttu and Reko have both raised their hands and Minttu gets the first say.

> Minttu: It seems as if they'd like to go swimming.
> Res: Why do you think they'd like to go swimming?
> Minttu: 'cos - - there's the color blue.
> Res: Okay - - then? Yes? (points to Jaakko who has raised his hand)
> Jaakko: /unclear/ then there down at the bottom would be a robot.

Minttu's comments are tentative: "it *seems as if*" and "they *would* like to go." When I ask Minttu why she gets this particular impression, she refers to a distinct formal-aesthetic feature of the photograph, that is, the blue color on the wall. Jaakko continues by identifying the robots in the photograph. The use of the words "it seems as if" emphasizes the impression the viewer gets from the photo instead of directly naming its subject matter. In viewing Pirilä's photo, no comments were made about the two boys sitting on the boxes of toys in their

[16] See Appendix 2 for abbreviations of the transcription.
[17] All the names of the children are pseudonyms.

underpants or the scenery reflected upside down on the wall, which one might assume children would notice if they were identifying the depicted referents in the photograph. Jaakko's notion, concerning robots was the only one which could be termed as naming the denotative information of the referent, but even then Jaakko uses the expressions "there would be" instead of "there are."

"It seems like" and "it's as if" are articulations of one's personal impression. They are acts of imagining a possible world and improvising an upcoming event: boys might like to go swimming. The accounts can be considered as manifestations of individual aesthetic agency. However, the expressions also imply a willingness to negotiate. In the excerpt, Minttu and Jaakko are suggesting something to the other viewers, instead of claiming their accounts to be the only right ones. Thus, they are creating a space for other children to join in the discussion, and allowing both individual and shared aesthetic agency to take place.

When preschoolers composed a co-created storyline in order to make sense of the photographs, it was constructed by several children through accounts that held a recognizable relation to earlier ones. Thus an account was accepted and furthered by semantic tying or expansion (Corsaro, 2005; Puroila et al., 2012a). It was typical that when constructing a mutual storyline children got anxious and forgot to raise their hands and sometimes talked over each others' accounts. Children clearly inspired each other, and the role of the narrator was switched effortlessly. Meaning-making in the group situation became a collective, spontaneous but still intentional process of thinking in action (Cox, 2005), constructing and testing accounts in a social interaction. As a manifestation of collective aesthetic agency, the children seemed to be moving together towards something indeterminate and not yet known. There was a sense of directedness in the creation of the storyline, and the preschoolers were obviously trying to accomplish something collectively. One can see here a parallel to children's fantasy play which is constituted totally in their social interaction and collective turn-by-turn talk instead of according to a script or a plan of actions (see Corsaro, 2005).

The joint storyline was flexible. It was created within a loose content-bound frame where the story could meander while still retaining a recognizable form and structure. Instead of a straightforward proceeding to a certain goal, the aesthetic agency was manifested in a play-like approach. Indirect and subtle influencing on the flow of actions was thus identifiable in children's accounts. Puroila et al. (2012a) describe young children's everyday narratives as fragmentary, disorganized and multifaceted – seldom following just one track. Children's co-narratives can be made of elements which are not necessarily tied together with temporal or

causal relationships.[18]

The flexible storyline permitted a back-and-forth movement, where a contributor could pause on a specific issue or a detail in her account, and explain it precisely, after which someone else would return to the unfinished story and take it further. This happened in viewing Johanna Hackman's *Utan oss/Without Us* (Figure 5, 2006-2010) where children first focused on a black ghost and a thief in the dim lighting of the photograph and the wearer of the white dress. The storyline continued with two boys' precise and eager explanation of the shop window dummies and their functions in a chain store's sales practices. After this the story returned back to the description of the photograph's gloomy and enigmatic atmosphere. The loose frame also allowed changes in the mood of the storyline. The tone of the accounts was transformed in viewing *Agnes I* by Riitta Ikonen and Karoline Hjorth (Figure 4, 2011). The children's accounts started with naming the subject matter. Various funny remarks about a witch, the goblin *Rölli*[19], a scarecrow and an old grandmother made the children laugh when looking at the character and her peculiar head-dress. Thus the making sense of the photograph appeared as an entertainment where preschoolers exaggerated, made jokes and also referred to their shared culture. After a while Jalo turns the mood of the photograph's storyline from cheerful into something else.

> Res: Yes, and then one more? Jalo, one more? (Vilho raises his hand)
> Jalo (in a quiet voice): Well - - you could help her to get away from the sea shore.
> Res: Yeah, you'd like to help her to get away from the sea shore. What made you, gave you the feeling that this old granny needs some help?
> Jalo: 'cos she's like - - (draws with a finger a contour resembling an old woman's lips over his own lips, then smiles at the photo and looks at the other children)
> Res (smiling): That's what the expression of her face looks like? (Jalo nods.) You caught it very nicely (repeats Jalo's gesture). Namely that was a really gallant comment - - that you could go and help her. Yes - - and then one more (points to Vilho).
> Vilho: I think her face looks like the surface of a Marianne sweet.

According to Jalo, the woman's facial expression implies that she might need help. With a small, precise gesture, drawing a contour against his lips, Jalo illustrates his view. Jalo seems

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[18] Puroila et al. (2012a) bring to the foreground the fact that young children's cognitive and oral language development have not traditionally been seen as adequate enough to produce verbal narratives which can form a complete, prototypical and a conventional good story. Children are treated more as becoming storytellers than active narrators who are able to express, organize and communicate their experiences.
[19] Rölli is an adventurous character in a Finnish TV series and films for children.

content with his suggestion, smiles at the photograph after it and looks around to see the other children's reactions. Jalo seems to enjoy being a narrator, but it seems equally important for him to see the other children's responses to his account. Due to Jalo's notion the laughter among children stops, the mood has changed, empathy towards the woman has been expressed. In his account, Jalo has paid attention to the old woman's facial expression. Vilho continues from it by making remarks on her wrinkled skin, voicing seriousness. It reminds him of the surface of a particular sweet, with a raised, streaky surface. It is notable here, how carefully both Jalo and Vilho read the facial expression of an old woman by means of gesture. Vilho also entwines the visual and tactual qualities of a skin into his multimodal account effortlessly.

Aesthetic Agency as Multimodal and Interactive Play

One clear feature of the preschoolers' accounts was the use of corporeal and facial expressions. These were used both to accompany talk and as nonverbal expressions in their own right. Some children made grandiloquent gestures and movements while making sense of the photographs. However, subtler nonverbal expressions, such as pointing out, smiling, sighing and making discreet facial signals were also present.

The preschoolers' corporeal and multimodal accounts question the conventions of the primacy of the eye and verbal communication in the encounter with an image. A photograph can thus become a means of aesthetic agency, actualized in multimodal play and interaction. In pragmatic aesthetics (Shusterman, 1992, 2000) the emphasis is on sensuous immediacy, somatic and multisensory experiencing of an artwork and a sense making which happens in active engagement with the work. In constructing their corporeal accounts, the preschoolers can be seen as breaking the distance between a photograph and the viewers. By their kinesthetic experience and expression, children engage in and keep the work of art literally in the 'here and now' in the sensory awareness manifested in their movements (Noland, 2009).

In the next example, while viewing *Alvar and Erik* (Figure 1, 2013) and Ea Vasko's (2009) *Reflections of the ever-changing* (Figure 2), Reko uses postures and movements as part of his accounts. In making sense of *Alvar and Erik*, he refers to a specific imagery. He sees a resemblance between the postures of the boys in the photograph and a particular Christmas angel decoration.

> Reko: They're like angels sitting.
> Res: (smiling) How do they - -
> Reko: Christmas angels! (smiling at the photo. Jaakko, Minttu, Pinja and Johannes smile also at the photo.)
> Res: What makes them Christmas angels?

> Reko: Well, 'cos they're sitting like that, like Christmas angels do.
> Res (nodding and smiling): Is it the way they are posing - -
> Reko: Yes, they're like this - - legs straight (wraps his arms around his legs)
> Res: You mimicked them well, just like that (talking to Reko and Liina who is also positioning her legs like the boys in the photo) - - one's like that and the other's - - (Reko poses like the boys in the photo. Some of the children have turned to look at Reko. Vilho positions his legs same way as Reko and Liina have done.)

In above example, Liina and Vilho repeat Reko's posture. They make sense of Reko's corporeal account by following him. Through this act of placing their feet on a bench, children 'are' for a moment the two boys in the photograph (see von Bonsdorff, 2015a). Gestures and other corporeal expressions are iconic in their nature; instead of describing the object viewed they are like the object. It is perhaps inappropriate to speak of the preschoolers *adding* a physical expression to a verbal explanation or *mimicking* the pose represented in a photograph (as I do in the excerpt above). When one refers to a child's aesthetic agency, this corporeal way of explaining and expressing oneself is a feature of the child's multimodal being in the world, a spontaneous way of situating oneself in the environment and interacting with its objects. Kinnunen and Einarsdottir (2013) foreground how young children's aesthetic experiences, often arising in action, are a vital element in their construction of knowledge. Children interpret the world and participate in social life via an embodied 'reading' of social relations alongside verbalization.[20] Thus embodied experiences are important aspects of their agency. (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Noland, 2009.)

While viewing Vasko's photograph (Figure 2, 2009) Reko invents a new posture from which to examine the photograph. He tilts his head against his shoulder, bends his body and starts to find new subject matters in the photo. Both the children and I follow Reko.

> Reko: Guess what?
> Res: Yes?
> Reko: That one looks like, if one looks at it like this, with one's head positioned like this (tilts his head on his shoulder) so, it looks exactly as if a human being were standing on a hoot/unclear/ hootchie.
> Res (gives a laugh): If one looks at it like this? (tilts her head on her shoulder.

[20] Christine M. Thompson (2007) pays attention to the performative aspects of young children's drawing events, where talk and gestures accompany their actions, and give rise to verbal exchanges and reciprocal shaping of their mutual drawing process.

> Vilho, Santra, Minttu, Liina and Jalo do the same. Eliel is in front of the white screen and tilts his head on his shoulder. After this Saku, Johannes, Pinja and Aino also repeat the gesture.)

In performing this new viewing angle, Reko takes a turn without raising his hand, and he initiates the discussion. Reko is obviously enthusiastic about his own idea and directs his question to me: "Guess what?" Reko treats the photograph as an interactive piece, something one can manipulate while viewing it. He plays with the photo by taking diverse positions and thus breaks the conventions of a stand-still, non-interfering contemplation of an artwork. He invites others to do the same by saying: "If *one* looks at it like this…" thus building and maintaining the mutual viewing experience and sharing aesthetic agency.

The preschoolers treated the photographs also as visual riddles which needed solving. Instead of focusing on the subject matter alone, they focused on details, small-scaled shapes, spots of light, markings and peculiar shadows in the photographs. The aesthetic agency manifested as a joint visual exploration of details and the joy of finding something which was not immediately or easily recognizable in the photo. Thus it was also a way to compete, show one's wit and daring in trying to convince others. The preschoolers' attachment to details became apparent in the viewing of Julius Koivistoinen's (2011) *Kontula, Helsinki* (Figure 3). Here the details of flying birds started taking on a bigger role than the more obvious subject matter, the three people on the suburban street.

> A new photo is projected on the wall. Reko, Saku, Jalo, Minttu, Liina and Eliel raise their hands. Saku is smiling.
> Res: All right, we'll start here (puts her hands on Saku's shoulders).
> Saku: There are those birds.
> Res: There are birds in the sky and - - what else?
> (…)
> Vilho: There's snow.
> Res: There's snow at least - - Pinja?
> Pinja: It's as, as if there were birds migrating.
> (…)
> Reko: And one bird is, well, well, almost stopping on that chimney.
> Res (gives a laugh): It <u>is</u> close to the chimney. They are quite far away (draws a curve in the air with her hand) [Reko: No, they're flying there, there, towards that lampost, there already is one lampost there (pointing to the photo) a little further away.]
> Res: Well, so there is. [Reko: And one is already going in front of the house.]
> (…)

> Jalo: There is one, one bird there, a small one (pointing to the photo) so it's little bit like it was a dead one, and going into the same/unclear/direction.
> Res: What gave you the impression - - that it could be dead?
> Jalo: Well cos' it drops down like that (draws a curve downwards with his finger in the air) - - like, where it turns downwards (makes a curve again).

The children's visual exploration of details can also be seen as a way of paying attention to the atmosphere the details constructed in the photograph. In contrast to earlier research findings on young children's inability to notice certain aesthetic properties in an image (Winner, Roseblatt, Windmueller, Davidson & Gardner, 1986; Sharples et al., 2003; Parsons, 1987; Szechter & Liben, 2007), for the preschoolers in this study it seemed important to describe *how* these birds were flying in the sky and what they looked like. The birds which are seen as moving away, falling down and dying against the gray sky, create a mood for the photo and tell us something about the choices the photographer has made. Although the preschoolers do not use words like *atmosphere*, *authorship* or *photographer's choices*, they depict these issues with their close observations of details. The birds, which spread across almost the whole sky, in different positions, are not there by accident.

The tiny details in *Utan oss*/*Without Us* (Figure 5, 2006-2010) received preschoolers' special attention. First there was a joint discussion, a storyline about a black character, a thief, and a white dress on a headless figure, on a shop window dummy in a gloomy photograph. After this, the children started to pay attention to certain small markings in the photo to make sense of what they were. The small black spot on the dress of the shop window dummy and the white spots on the walls were troublesome for the preschoolers and generated a lively discussion. In Koivistoinen's photo (Figure 3, 2011) the birds were details that could immediately be identified; here, however, the details are enigmatic. It is notable that here, as also when viewing Vasko's photo (Figure 2, 2009), the children's accounts do not refer to the quality of the photograph, its blurriness or explain odd spots due to a poor technical skill, despite the fact the photo is very granular. The spot on the dress starts to represent something for the children and it is given a concrete explanation; it is a mouse.

> Johannes: It's like there's a (points to the photo) a mouse.
> Res: A <u>mouse?</u>
> Johannes: There/unclear/ (points to the photo)
> Res: Could you go and show us where you see the mouse? (Johannes goes over to the screen and points to the photo).
> Res |astonished|: There! (Eliel gives a laugh, Santra laughs, Saku and Pinja are smiling.)
> Reko: I can see a mouse too (points to the photo, smiling) - - there on that outfit.

> [Liina: I can see it too! (raises her hand while talking)] (Minttu is smiling at the photo.)

This blurred photograph, a snapshot, seemed to offer room for diverse views but, interestingly, small formal details also received special attention in sharply focused photographs[21]. Typical of the discussions about the details was their impatient rhythm, the accounts following each other in quick succession and the raising of hands or waiting for one's turn to speak were forgotten. Noticing and naming details seemed to form a play-like imagining and improvisation and offer the children a joint entertainment, as manifested by their readiness to recognize the same subject as their peers, approving it with enthusiasm and in these ways constructing like-mindedness in the group; "I can see a mouse too!"

Conclusions

In this article, I examined meaning-making during a contemporary photography workshop in a preschool class. The viewing of 13 contemporary photographic artworks produced a variety of accounts among the preschoolers. The making sense of what one saw projected on the wall of the daycare center was done using multiple means and turned out to be a manifestation of both individual and shared aesthetic agency. For the preschoolers, contemporary photographic art seemed to represent something which needed filling in, explanations and motives. Thus photographs called for thinking *with* (Rautio, 2014) the photographs, that is, imagining, play-like improvising and carrying forward a flow of accounts in the creation of several possible worlds.

In accordance with earlier research findings, preschoolers focused on the subject matter and wanted to name it. Where the present results deviate from earlier reports is that identifying the denotative information of photograph's referent and making simple descriptions of it (see Liben, 2003) was not all that happened in the course of concentrating on the subject matter. When I studied the preschoolers' explanations I noticed their considerable variety and the flexible use of single or chains of accounts. In giving their accounts, the children referred to their immediate feelings, described their impressions, linked subjects to their own every day experiences, paid attention to the formal-aesthetic features of a photograph and created solutions to the visual riddles the photographs confronted them with. Multimodal explanations as to why a particular person, animal or object was in the photo and what these actors had done earlier or would do next, were ways of constructing motives for a photograph and offering reasons regarding what the photographer might have wanted to convey via the

[21] E.g., viewing *Raven* by Susanna Majuri (2009) and *By Boat* by Janne Lehtinen (2010).

photograph.

It was surprising that photographs, although often seen as simple representational forms and convincing records or icons of the authentic world *as it is*, meant for children in this study something more like *as if*. Thus the photographs were interpretable, imaginative and negotiable representations –"both and" – rather than something to be stated as true or false. However, while imaginative, the children's accounts remained embedded in their everyday lives and experiences.

On the one hand, viewing the photographs offered children subject positions, and the power and pleasure of being an aesthetic agent who could make initiatives, express one's own views and preferences and demonstrate one's competence. On the other hand, the activity was a site for shared aesthetic agency, for negotiation, in which one had to take notice of others' points of view and as a group construct a collective storyline. The photographic artwork functioned as a multilayered and loose frame in which turn takings, extending upon and transforming others' views took place, but where one could also abandon what had been proposed and construct something new. A photo could also be a starting point for an explanation which extended beyond the immediate subject matter by giving information not visible in the photograph per se (see Setälä, 2012). This usually meant referring to personal life experiences, one's possessions, family ties or skills.

The group contained six very active participants who often initiated and dominated discussions in the viewing session and to whom the rest of the group very easily adjusted as group members. The group's dynamics thus had an influence on the articulation of aesthetic agency. Some children expressed their remarks in a straightforward and bold ways. When considering aesthetic agency as an indirect and sensitive way of having an impact on things, it is notable that children also used more subtle expressions and were more tentative in seeking to influence the flow of actions. Staying silent in the group did not necessarily mean staying outside; the preschoolers joined in the mutual activity also merely by looking and communicating with facial expressions, sighs, laughter and small gestures. Altogether, the group acted very constructively and considerately to each other and to me, as a new adult in the group. Resistance was scarce and different views were able to co-exist.

The group situation was favorable for collective meaning-making, influencing each other, and deciding together on what to pay attention to while viewing the photographs. This resonates with the antiessentialist photography research interests, where the focus is on the situatedness of an interpretation, and thus its varying, process like and negotiable nature. In their collective 'thinking in action', the children were actively defining reality rather, than identifying or passively reflecting it as a given (Cox, 2005). Making sense of the photographs was

manifested as a joint event of aesthetic agency, that is, multimodal and play-like constructing of possible worlds where children creatively combined elements of both their own life and those of adults.

The photographs were catalysts for discussions on representations of action movies, old people, girls and boys, children's culture products, family ties, wild animals and pets, commercial displays and photography and painting as visual mediums. Accounts dealt with feelings of empathy, joy, excitement and included notions of someone looking funny, strange, sad, scared, enigmatic, noble and beautiful. Thus, contemporary art showed itself to be a diverse and a promising tool for aesthetic agency, for constructing one's relationship with the surrounding world and sharing it with others, starting from the early years of life.

In generalizing the findings of this case study, the particularity and situatedness of the data production need to be taken into account. I realize that had I organized more than one photography viewing session, I would have been able to collect more data and formulate a more comprehensive view of preschoolers' accounts and perhaps recognize more profound tendencies and variations among them. Art and its meaning-making are always situational and context-bound. Repeating the workshop as such with a new set of contemporary photographs, or even with the same photos, would likely produce new accounts by preschoolers. Nevertheless, my research results indicate certain patterns are present in the activity of explaining and making sense of the photographs. The present purpose, then, is to try to make explicit the versatile and flexible use of accounts in the meaning-making process and to show the competence of preschoolers as an art audience, in displaying both individual and collective aesthetic agency. I have also tried to demonstrate some of the possibilities that contemporary art can offer in promoting aesthetic agency in early childhood education.

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Appendix 1

List of the contemporary photographs viewed in the workshop, organized in the daycare center's preschool class, in October 2014. Photographs are in the same order as the children viewed them. Names of the five photographs, discussed in the paper, are bolded.

1. Marjukka Vainio (2006-2010). *Red II.* Pigment print on archival paper, diasec. 68 x 68 cm, edition of 7+2AP. Retrieved from http://helsinkischool.fi/artists/marjukka-vainio/portfolio/kimono 7.7.2016
2. **Marja Pirilä (2013). *Camera Obscura/Alvar and Erik, Rovaniemi*.** Pigment ink print, 142 x 111 cm, edition 7+7+2AP. Retrieved from http://www.marjapirila.com/interior.html, 4th image on the first row. 7.7.2016.
3. Miklos Gaál (2010). *Coastline II.* Retrieved from http://www.artfacts.net/artworkspics/24436.jpg 7.7.2016
4. **Riitta Ikonen & Karoline Hjorth (2011). Eyes as Big as Plates # Agnes I (Norway).** 120 x 100 cm, edition of 7+ 2AP; 60 x 50 cm, edition of 10+2AP. Retrieved from http://www.riittaikonen.com/yz7gwvf6uxt9mlvkuzp2xexzlv99s4 7.7.2016.
5. Heidi Lunabba (2011). From the series *Twins* [Tvillingar/Kaksoset]. Retrieved from http://www.valokuvataiteenmuseo.fi/en/exhibitions/past/event/158---heidi-lunabba-kaksoset-naeyttely , image 5/7. 7.7.2016.
6. **Ea Vasko (2009). *#3 from series Reflections of the ever-changing (the short history of now).*** Digital c-print, mounted on matte diasec. 155 x 150 cm, edition of 5+2AP; 262 x 60 cm, edition of 3+1AP. Retrieved from http://helsinkischool.fi/artists/ea-vasko/portfolio/porfolio/ 7.7.2016.
7. **Johanna Hackman (2006-2010). From series *Utan oss. Ilman meitä* [Without Us].** Retrieved from http://cargocollective.com/visugalleria/Johanna-Hackman 7.7.2016.
8. **Julius Koivistoinen (2011). *Kontula, Helsinki. #9 from series Terrarium, Everyday paradise.*** Retrieved from http://www.julious.fi/arjenparatiiseja/project.html 7.7.2016.
9. Susanna Majuri (2009). *Raven.* C-print on Diasec. 100 x 150 cm, edition of 5+2AP. Retrieved from http://www.susannamajuri.com/raven 7.7.2016.
10. Kai Fagerström (2010). From series *House in the Woods.* In K. Fagerström, H. Willamo & R. Rasa (2011) *House in the Woods*, p. 5. Helsinki: Maahenki.
11. Martti Jämsä (1999-2004). From series *Kesä* [Summertime]. In M. Jämsä (2003) *Kesä, Summertime*, p. 47. Helsinki: Musta taide.
12. Janne Lehtinen (2010). *By Boat.* From the series *Sacred Bird.* Inkjet print, 100 x 130 cm, edition of 5+2AP. Retrieved from http://helsinkischool.fi/artists/janne-lehtinen/portfolio/sacred-bird 7.7.2016.
13. Ilkka Halso (2004). *Roller-coaster.* From the series of *Museum of Nature.* 100 x 134 cm, edition 6; 50 x 67 cm, edition 10. Retrieved from http://www.saunalahti.fi/halso/pdf_download/museumofnature.pdf , page 6. 7.7.2016.

Appendix 2

Abbreviations of the transcription:

Res = the researcher
- - = a pause of 2-4 sec
(pointing to the photo) = a gesture, movement or facial impression during turn/someone else's turn
[Jalo: It is a witch] = overlapping talk
|eagerly| = a mood expressed during one's turn
<u>a witch</u> = an emphasized expression
/unclear/ = unrecognizable talk
(…) = breaking off the discussion

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