

## Outi Länsikunnas

### “Harjula, my favourite place” – photography project 1-14 September 2005



#### 1. Favourite place.

The three principal objectives of the “Harjula, my favourite place” project were:

- to encourage people to reflect on their daily environment and bind them more closely to it,
- to examine the different values held by individuals in relation to their habitat and favourite surroundings, and
- to present a photographic display of their favourite surroundings, which would serve to publicize them and promote a sense of community.



#### 2. A field laboratory made out of a portable cabin

Photo: Outi Länsikunnas

Practical work for the project was carried out in a field laboratory made out of a portable cabin located at Harjula School car park. Participants were given pinhole cameras made from shoeboxes for photographing their favourite surroundings. This provided them with an opportunity to learn more about the basics of photography, pinhole cameras, and developing techniques. Whether developing photos or assessing the final results, the sense of place and belonging was a regular topic of discussion throughout the project. All Harjula residents could informally take part in artistic activities, both participants and others.



### 3. Sharing pinhole cameras.

Photo: Keijo Länsikunnas

The Nurmijärvi council library and cultural affairs office funded the project, which also received financial assistance from various private-sector individuals and enterprises. Other collaborators were Nurmijärvi Art School and the University of Lapland. Practical responsibility was shared by myself, Outi Länsikunnas, Eeva Koivu, my fellow student at the University of Lapland, and Laura Pohjonen, my colleague at Nurmijärvi Art School. My role in the community is that of resident, principal of Nurmijärvi Art School, art teacher to adult students, neighbour, and former full-time mother. My role in this project is that of organizer, advisor, local resident, and researcher.



### 4. Dark room.

Photo: Outi Länsikunnas

This project formed part of my action research that focuses on the impressions and experience of the residents of Harjula and Syrjälä regarding their favourite surroundings. The “Harjula, my favourite place” photography project serves as a potential forum and instrument for encouraging environmental awareness by its residents. From the communal viewpoint, I am making available new information on its members’ favourite surroundings. From the viewpoint of individual participants, my research clarifies the relation between their own favourite surroundings and their sense of identity in the local community. In my action research into aspects of art education, I also question the use of *the pinhole camera as a means of portraying one’s favourite surroundings* and analyse progress made during the project and its methodology. I also aim to increase the human aspects of community evaluation,

personal commitment by its residents, and the development of mutual activities.

Artistic activities represent an opportunity through which I can collect data and make people aware of their surroundings. The role of art education is to evoke a sense of awareness, both at the individual and communal level, and perhaps also within the Nurmijärvi council administration.

Artistic activities can often provide a means of expression for those issues and groups that would not otherwise be heard<sup>1</sup>. This is a pilot project for Harjula that will hopefully inspire other initiatives, and my research may offer further possibilities for action research, whose aim is to develop community activities, both artistic and otherwise.

The fundamental idea of surveying people's experience of their favourite surroundings through photographs is based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy. Human beings and their environment are existentially in a state of constant interaction: environmental ties are an essential part of human existence. Phenomenology calls for a return to experience, that is to feel, to see, and to hear.<sup>2</sup> In phenomenological research, human action is seen as a conscious and active

process that is considered intentional.<sup>3</sup> The body phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty seeks to provide a direct interpretation of experience as an *occurrence* rather than concerning itself with its rationale. It is then a call to return to the naïve experience of the world that exists before reflection and analysis, and to examine phenomena when located in concrete reality and existence.<sup>4</sup>



5. Favourite place.

In my research, location or place is defined through the concept of "*favourite place*". Places are selected based on impressions created by positive experience in certain surroundings. Although surroundings are subjective, they also contain intersubjective elements. The experience of favourite surroundings and personal habitat is present within the individual's own concepts and experience together with the memory of them, but collective images of such surroundings are also shaped by

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<sup>1</sup> Hiltunen & Jokela 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Hyvönen, 2004.

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<sup>3</sup> Anttila 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Hyvönen 2004.

the media and people living in other areas. Experience of place is rooted in one's personal life situation, in which age, size, habitat, and personal relations have a considerable influence.



6. Favourite place.

The favourite places studied in this research also represent the current surroundings of the individuals concerned, and so I approach this topic through the concept of *participation*. The residents' environment represents a place and a part of themselves, whereas the casual observer sees the same environment from a distance as an outsider (Relph 1979; Karjalainen 1987). State of mind also influences the concept of environment. A place always represents personal experience that develops when I see the environment as a meaningful space, which I then proceed to fill with emotions, reminiscences, hopes, and fears.



7. Favourite place.

In an instant, my memory and reminiscences can transport me to another time and place.<sup>5</sup> The continuum of temporality inherent when experiencing favourite places is formalized in memory and the rationale of place selection. The environment takes on new meaning in the daily routines of its inhabitants. Positive events are lodged in memory as having occurred in a specific place, the image of which is then recorded as an attribute of that same event. Revisiting the place later provokes the memory of it and the thoughts and emotions associated with it. Thus place symbolizes both a pleasing event and the continuum of temporality as a link to favourite surroundings<sup>6</sup>.

A favourite place is also seen in this research as a place to which *aesthetic experience* is linked. Aesthetic experience can also be unpleasant. Although aesthetic experience may not always be pleasing, the

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<sup>5</sup> Tani 1997.

subsequent metareaction provokes a sense of satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> When experiencing a favourite place, I define its aesthetic as something positive and pleasing that may be experienced in one's surroundings. According to Eaton, the starting point of aesthetic experience is personal reaction. Aesthetic value is comprised of both individual reaction and its social and cultural context. A topic may then have aesthetic value if the attention paid to it, and analysis of its inherent qualities causes a sense of satisfaction, or has a positive influence on other areas of human behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Those places that I have studied are well known to people of all ages. Children differ from those of adults in that human size in relation to the surroundings affect this experience in many ways. Canter defines the concept of place as the relationship between physical characteristics and action.<sup>8</sup> Whatever place, locality, habitat, or region mean to people is comprised of memories of the past and experience of the present.

## Litterature

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<sup>6</sup> Tuovinen 1992, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Eaton, 1994, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Canter 1997.