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## How about a visual lecture?

Viewers' Interpretations of a Visual-Pedagogical Installation Challenging Family Photography

## ¿Qué tal una clase visual?

Las interpretaciones de los espectadores de una instalación visual-pedagógica que cuestiona la fotografía de familia

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Seija Ulkuniemi\*

### Abstract

This article describes an experiment where a teacher-artist-researcher made an installation on family photography. This installation, a visual-pedagogical production, was shown in various venues to gather viewers' responses for the work. The data, 249 responses, was analyzed to see what kind of response the viewers gave and how they interpreted the work. The responses were divided into seven types of which one, the meaning-searchers, was analyzed in more detail. The author states that the viewers, with their written responses, became active participants in the creation process of the installation. In addition to this, some of them started to ponder about their lives and ways of using their family photographs. The analyzing categories may be used for further research of viewers' responses, whose gathering is recommended in the light of this research.

### Key words:

Art education, installation, family photography, response, interpretation

### Resumen

En este artículo se describe un experimento en el que un profesor-artista-investigador realizó una instalación acerca de la fotografía de familia. Esta instalación, una producción visual-pedagógica, se ha exhibido en varios lugares para recoger las respuestas de los espectadores de la obra. Los datos, 249 opiniones, fueron analizados para ver qué tipo de respuesta daban los espectadores, y cómo interpretaban la obra. Las respuestas se dividieron en siete grupos de los cuales uno, los buscadores de significado, se analizó con más detalle. El autor afirma que los espectadores, con sus respuestas escritas, se convirtieron en participantes activos en el proceso de creación de la instalación. Además de esto, algunos de ellos comenzaron a reflexionar sobre sus vidas y las maneras en las que utilizaban sus fotografías de familia. Las categorías de análisis se pueden utilizar para futuras investigaciones centradas en las respuestas de los espectadores, cuya recopilación se recomienda a la luz de esta investigación.

### Palabras clave:

Educación artística, instalación, fotografía de familia, respuesta, interpretación.

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\*Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland  
Seija.Ulkuniemi@ulapland.fi

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Being an art educator in Finland these days often means that one is not only a teacher that is interested in art but also constantly reflecting on one's work, researching. One is supposed to find out if one's work has reached its aims. My work is done under this framework: I try to find out if and how I can be an art educator by giving «a visual lecture».

The data of this article was gathered for my doctoral dissertation (Ulkuniemi, 2005 and 2007), which deals with the development of the genre of family photography, the typical features of that genre and the reception of my installations based on the genre. During the years 1996-2002 I made four photographic installations, which were exhibited in various venues. I tried to present this work both within the art world, that is, in art museums, and outside it, in places to which people normally go: libraries, entrance halls of universities, and churches. In this article, I will concentrate on the response I received to the installation called *The Enchanted Carpet of the Holy Daily Life* (picture 1). It was made in 1996. It consisted of photos that were sewn together and depicted my daily life as well as my life on a holiday – two days photographed every five minutes. Every other photo was taken by me, every other one by my assistant Savanna Pippola. In some of the venues it was possible to show the video connected to the work explaining chronologically photo by photo what happened (see appendix 1). I will analyze the data I gathered from this installation from the year 1996 by the end of the year 2002. The data consists of the feedback<sup>1</sup> written in the notebooks which I made available to the public. The introductory finished like this: «I am interested in hearing from you and receiving your comments. Write your response in the booklet on the table, please.»

## 1. Bringing forth the voice of the viewer

My starting point was to tie together the ideas of the producer of a work and the comments of those who encounter it on the assumption that the voice of the viewers will bring something new to the work. I made installations - visual narratives - that tell about some of the typical features of the genre of family photography by doing some things unconventionally. The aim of my works is to make the viewers think about their own photographs and their relation to them; this is why I call them visual-pedagogical productions. In addition, they are suggestions for the alternative use of family photographs.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the comments here were translated from the original texts to Finnish: from Spanish by Piritta Pietilä and from Dutch by Anneli van Setten-Salmi and Risto Mustakallio. I have checked some English comments from Outi Snellman and made the final translations to English. Richard Foley is responsible for the final translation.



Figure 1. Collage of photographs taken in various venues of the installation *The Enchanted Carpet of the Holy Daily Life*. The collage introduces both the whole «carpet» and some details of it.

By gathering open responses, I am trying to find out: *What kind of response the viewers give and What kind of thoughts and emotions my works arouse in them.* What they want to tell about their experience and interpretation is central. I look more closely to those responses which searched for the meanings and paid attention to how the viewers referred to the themes of the work. Ultimately, I believe in the idea presented by Paula Tuomikoski (1987: 175-177) that the reception of art is at its best a creative process in which the viewer tries to determine the meaning of the work. When encountering the work, viewers make interpretations, which are influenced by their thoughts and emotions. Through this they may deepen their understanding of themselves and the world (Räsänen, 1993: 117). In this situation it may also be easier to confront confusing and hard feelings (Hepburn, 1987: 209, 218).

In Finnish art education, the reception of art became a focus of attention through the Discipline Based Art Education-movement, which stressed criticism and with it the ability to use the concepts of art. In the 1990s, much research was done on the reception of art (e.g., Lepistö, 1985 and 1989; Linko, 1992; Saarnivaara, 1993; Räsänen, 1993 and 1997; Granö, 1996 & Viitanen, 1998). With the exception of Lepistö's research, all of these studies have used reproductions of the art works when collecting the data. In the last few years, it has become more common among researchers to use originals (e.g. Anttila, 1998; Suikkanen, 1999). I continue following this path of «longing for the authentic experiences» (see Linko, 1998), which here means that I will gather my data in the situations in which people experience my works directly.

Postmodern art education (see, e.g., Efland and al., 1998) has questioned the focus on works of art and given recognition to pictures of daily life and popular culture. My study represents this postmodern thinking: the focus is on family photography where the users are often also producers of the pictures themselves. Thanks to postmodernism, the superiority of experts in art is not taken for granted: instead the trend is to give more value to the experience of the ordinary people. I will use the classifications made by the research on art reception mainly to organize my data and, to avoid creating any strong hierarchy among the groups. My aim is to stress the variation in the interpretations and the multiple voices of the viewers.

Although it was not my primary intention to create «art» or to show my works in the context of the art world, the viewers have considered them to be «exhibitions». This is probably because the works have been presented as artefacts. Whether they are art as well can of course be explored in many ways. I have made the works more from the point of view of an art educator than that of an artist. The spirit of my study is the same as that in action research, where, for example, a teacher examines his/her own work.

However, this study yields information on what the producers of art may find out about the influence of their works.

## 2. Classification of the responses

I familiarized myself with my data, the 249 written comments (appendix 1), by reading it several times. First, I used the idea of grounded theory, and tried to extract some of the features of the data that emerged from it. My assumptions must have influenced how I read the feedback, that is, which features I noticed. First, I tried to focus on the different types of feedback of the viewers. This led me to classify the feedback to *positive* (positive, praising or encouraging), *negative* (negative, critical or commenting in a derogatory way), feedback containing *both of these*, and *neutral* feedback. The last-mentioned was usually discussion, which did not try to characterize the work but concentrated on interpreting the thoughts of the viewer. I also gave names to each of the types of responding.

The next round of reading to classify the data was devoted to the search for the main content of each piece of feedback: the message connected to the work or the whole experience of the exhibition that seemed to be central in the feedback. This led me to make some new classifications. Finally, I combined these classifications by applying those made by Elliot Eisner (1972) and Kati Anttila (1998) and ended up with the following groups, which are not in a hierarchical order:

### 1. **Comments on the formal qualities of the work** (see Eisner's «formal dimension»)

#### 1a. **Expressions concerning the quality of the work**

The comment may concern the work, the exhibition or the idea of the work, and usually is an answer to the question «what kind of work?»

#### 1b. **Comments on the form or technical realization of the work**

In addition to or instead of a comment falling under 1A the viewer mentions his/her thoughts about the form or technical realization of the work.

### 2. **Comments on the motif of the work** (see Anttila's «the motif-centred»)

#### 2a. **Motif namers**

The viewer tells what he/she saw, describing the content but not considering its meaning.

#### 2b. **Selectively motif-focused**

The viewer picks one or a few photographs from the whole work and comments on them.

**3. Experience-centered** (see Eisner's «experiential dimension»)

**3a. Emotion-oriented**

The viewer stresses the emotions and experience stimulated by the work or the exhibition.

**3b. Participation-oriented**

The viewer stresses the physical sensations or the importance of physical activity, such as walking or kneeling.

**4. Meaning-searchers** (see Anttila's «searching for the meaning»)

**4a. Interpreters of the theme** (see Eisner's «symbolic or thematic dimension»)

The viewer tries to determine the theme of the work, but does not necessarily give any reasons for his/her interpretation. Some of these interpretations are metaphorical, poetic or «bigger than the work».

**4b. Interpreters of the theme through expression** (see Eisner's «material dimension»)

The viewer describes the way the work is made and/or its formal qualities, connecting this with a discussion of the meaning of the work.

**5. Refers to the art world** (see Eisner's «contextual dimension»)

**5a. Users of the term «art»**

The viewer states whether the work is or is not art by using the term «art» or «artist».

**5b. Placing in the field of art**

The viewer situates the work in the field of art, for example, by comparing it with the other phenomena of the art world using the concepts of the art world.

**6. Personal comments**

**6a. Personal messages, greetings and encouragement**

The viewer writes a letter-like or other message addressed to me personally, such as a greeting or words of encouragement.

**6b. Comments on my personality or life**

The viewer comments on my personality or life.

**7. Other comments**

**7a. Drawings**

The feedback is a drawing without any text.

**7b. Comments on the comments and comments unrelated to the matter at hand**

The comment cannot be placed in any of the groups mentioned above or is obviously a comment on another comment.

In this state of grouping each comment was only put to one group, only counted once (appendix 1). If it only contained comment of the quality of the work, it was put in group 1A. But if it also commented the realization, it was put in 1B. In a way the grouping was hierarchical up to group 4: if the commentator was pondering the meaning of the work, her/his comment was put in that group even though it had references to groups 1-3. The exceptional comments referring to art were put to group 5. The group 6 was solely for personal comments not having other contents, and group 7 for «the rest»: mere pictures of comments not suiting to any other groups.

### 3. Main features of the responses and their regional characters

Most of the responses were clearly positive. The neutral comments usually focused on discussing the theme of the work or its meaning without commenting on its quality. I received some negative or critical feedback from those commenting in the entrance hall of the University of Lapland, but most of this type came from those writing in the stairway in the University of Granada. Typical for Granada, where the students had time to write comments in the hall, was that they used the feedback book to their mutual communication: they commented each others' comments.

In general, though the installation was shown in several western countries, I do not find it essential to analyze the responses widely from cultural perspective. I will only sum up some main characteristics of the responses I found having some cultural reference.

From the Netherlands I got many comments referring to the dilemma of private/public, e.g. «I'd like to watch the carpet for hours, I love to take a look into your life – 'sneaking' in public». It also became obvious how some people stressed a Finnish national spirit: «An interesting exhibition of Finnish daily life that must be interesting to look at even after many years.» The differences between Finnish and Dutch cultures were remarked: «The Dutch kids were very interested in the nearly naked Finns. The sauna culture is pretty unfamiliar here. The kids would have liked to look at the photos for a long time.» This may be explained by the fact that many had written the feedback in Finnish and being away from their own country made them see the work more from a national point of view. People missed their homeland: «Seija, thank you for bringing the Finnish daily life to the immigrants that moved from Finland two months ago and who are homesick.» (Rotterdam). In the United States, the characteristic feature was that the gallery visitors started their comments by calling me «Seija», even though they did not know me personally.

## 4. Analyzis of the reponses according to the their types

In this chapter I will give examples of the various kinds of responses. I have made the sub-titles of this chapter following the order of type groupings presented in chapter 2. The type group 4 will be analyzed in more detail than the others due to its importance from the art educational perspective.

### 4.1 A lovely idea or a beautiful quilt - concentrating on the formal qualities

Most of the feedback from almost all of the places focused primarily on commenting on the formal qualities of the work (appendix 1). Especially emphasized were *expressions assessing the quality of the work*. Typical comments were that the work is «great» (Rotterdam), «terribly great» (Muurola), «pretty nice» (Granada) or «terrific!» (New York). Some considered it «beautiful» (Granada), «funny» (Härnösand) or «as a nice something to cheer one up» (Rotterdam). The work was also taken as «natural» (Granada) or «alive» (Manchester). The expression «interesting» was often used, but the definition of it was seldom indicated. Some of the viewers stressed the work offered something totally new to them: «Very interesting & different – I have never seen anything like this before.» (University of Lapland) Others wanted to devote more time to the exhibition: «A very interesting carpet! It would have been nice to look at it longer!» (Exmouth)“

The concept «idea» was repeated in many of the responses. It was considered «interesting» (Exmouth), «wonderful» (Exmouth) or «ingenious» (Granada). What was meant by the word «idea», normally remained unclear. It was also extremely common to stress the uniqueness of the work: «I think it is very unique and I like it very much.» (New York)

In some of the comments on the quality, metaphors referring to the senses, especially taste, were used: «Lovely idea! Nice chocolate!» (Exmouth); «Seija, it is a delicious Finnish dessert!» (East Carolina) and «A carpet that tastes like life!» (Muurola)

One visitor described the work as one that makes people stop: «Ugh! Stopping and brave!» (University of Lapland). But another felt it was «vulgar and useless» (University of Lapland). The negative comments, mainly from Granada, were statements like: «It is nuts!» Some of the comments contained both positive and negative feedback: «Fascinating – but disconcerting.» (Exmouth)



Some people gave positive responses, even though they did not get the point of the work: «The idea seems original, creative and ambitious, but does not transmit the real idea; it is still worthy of appreciation.» (Granada). How demanding it is to try to find the meaning of the work can be seen in the comment where the writers discuss the importance of their own input in the process of understanding:

The idea is very original; it is well done, but we do not totally get the point. Is it a performance? What is it good for? What is behind the idea of walking on this carpet? Maybe the people, including us, do not get the point, because we have not thought it over enough. (Granada)

Comments on *the technical realization of the work* were rather common. Some of these stated the need of the viewer to apply the same technique to his/her family own photographs: «It is perfect as wallpaper in the children's room, so you will not need a pin board. The idea of sewing is ingenious. →» (Granada) The idea was considered «great for all of the holiday photos» (Rotterdam). Some found it suitable for art education: «Very interesting – great for a class project!» (New York) Some of the answers especially considered the technique with which the work was realized – sewing the photos into a quilt – as a good thing: They «liked the patchwork effect» (Exmouth) or «the way of placing and combining all of the photographs», which was said to be «beautiful» (Granada). Some people started to plan the same kind of thing for their own home: «When I grow up, I will make one for my home. →» (Granada)

In many of the comments, the effort which the work demanded was appreciated: «I thought this was an unusual way of producing a diary. It seems very hard work sewing + taking pictures; it must be very important for you, as you have taken a lot of time to produce it.» (Manchester) Sometimes people referred to my personality when judging the work as demanding: «The one who has done this has to be very patient. – » (Granada) Others compared the discipline the work demands to their own personality: «Seija. That is truly amazing. You have a great skill. You truly have more patience doing stuff like that than I ever will. The carpet is beautiful.» (East Carolina) One of the writers suggested that I have too much time because I can make these kinds of things: «Seija ~ I think you have a lot of time on your hands.» (East Carolina)

In some of the comments on the formal aspects of the work, there were also observations on the use of the two perspectives in the work: «An interesting way to view a collection of «family life» photos & to see two perspectives at once.» (Manchester) Some criticized the orientation of the photographs (every other one was upside down): «– I get a bit of a headache from looking at the pictures because you have to turn your head different ways

to be able to “read” the story. → (Amsterdam). Some felt that the repetition introduced by using the double shots was disturbing: «Some photos come up twice; you should change some of them» (Granada) Also the sheer quantity of the photos got criticism: «Because there are so many photos, they divide my attention.» (Granada)

A feature connected with the technical realization of the work that was considered positive was that the photos taken were unplanned: «A collection of photos, where the idea of «Do I look good now?» is absent, and that is good. →» (Muurola) One of the comments on the realization was metaphorical: «– The children acquire life through playing. This way of yours is also a way of living the daily life.» (University of Lapland) One and the same writer could both like the idea and criticize the realization: Excellent idea but quite confusing – your eyes wander all over the place.» (Exmouth)

Some comments contained suggestions for alternative realizations: « – Could they be printed on cloth & used in a “real” quilt?» (Manchester). Another was interested «to see a patchwork of selected photographs showing different textures and light in the interpretation expression of family life (Manchester).

One writer, who felt the carpet was «really great», mentioned that it «compelled one to walk on one’s knees and let oneself become a child again» (Muurola). The writing seemed to suggest that it was very difficult, if not impossible, for the writer to meet these demands of the carpet.

One person became interested in the possibility of giving a response and wanted to use the idea in his/her own exhibitions: «— the most interesting thing is that you leave a notebook so that folks can write their opinions. With your permission I will borrow your idea when I show my own works, OK?» (Granada)

## 4.2 Aesthetics of daily life or pornography – thoughts on the motif

Most of the responses *focusing on the motif of the work* are comments mainly telling what the work is about, such as «How much a day may contain...» (Muurola) or «So much happens in a day in the life of a human being» (Muurola).

The photos were taken as historical documents: «It would be nice if one could store these, let us say, for 1000 years to come – for the pleasure and education of the historians and folklorists and others! →» (Rotterdam) Daily life was noticed to have its numerous interruptions: «Hip-hip aesthetics of the daily life: ruptures-ruptures-

ruptures.» (Rotterdam) One person showed his/her interest in broadening the typical motives of photographing: «From this day on I will for sure take photos of my daily life. →» (Granada)

In some cases, the writer *singled out a particular motif*: «I like the little boy with a striped shirt and shaggy hair!!» (Granada) Another claimed: «The photos of work are boring.» (Muurola) Some of the comments referred to the photos of naked people: «I see tiny breasts and the asses of mature women – » (Granada) This was criticized: «What the fuck? Ugh! Pornography!» (University of Lapland) Probably the photos of naked children prompted the feedback in which the work was considered as offensive: «I think it is very stupid and may ruin the sensitivity of the people who encounter that stupidity. It is the beginning of child pornography.» (Granada)

### 4.3 Experience-centeredness: A carpet that arouses memories or offers an experience for many senses

Of those who were *experience-centered* in their feedback, more were emotion-oriented than participation-oriented. *The emotion-oriented* responses included an idea that the work made one think: «It is really strong, makes one think. Deep, fugitive, startling. →» (Granada) It touched the viewer: «I have never before seen an exhibition like this. I was moved by the place, the day and especially the message. Maybe you cannot get close to all of the photos, but I only want to say that I liked it a lot! →» (Granada)

Some felt the awakening of the memories was the main thing: «This is what the life of the Finns is about - sauna and beautiful nature. This awoke many thoughts and memories of my homeland. →» (Amsterdam) The memory work was also used as a tool for reflection:

Memories from the home country. It was nice to see the Finnish sauna and the Finnish landscape and Finland and Finland and Finland. When one sees this one realizes if one misses home. And if, how much. I only felt good to see these photos, even though I do not want to get home right now, I know that somewhere the things I am used to do exist. (Amsterdam)

Positive feelings were often described in connection with the experience that visiting the exhibition brightened up many viewer's daily life: «The grey workday evening turned to a party. →» (Muurola); «We felt the magic. →» (Muurola); «– a nice experience in the middle of a workday evening of the working week. It is great that you keep on doing these; they

bring light to our lives.» (University of Lapland); «Feeling good.» (University of Lapland); «Dear Seija – I find your magic carpet most refreshing – just like you.» (East Carolina)

Part of the feedback stressing the experience was metaphorical and sent a message making it sound as if the viewer had participated in my life: «Looking at the exhibition I felt that I was in your home – walking alongside you. –» (East-Carolina)

The work also evoked negative feelings: «I started to feel a crazy anxiety when viewing the photos and it just grew as I realized they were stitched to each other. I cannot tell why. The idea feels good anyway...» (University of Lapland) Partly this anxiety was caused by being a reminder of the busy lifestyle: «A nice idea! But my own stress comes out as I look at the bustle of daily life. Where is “the mother’s own time”? A calming photo from the jogging path.» (Hallstavik)

*Participation-oriented* responses most often concentrated on describing the experience of walking on the carpet: «– I was enchanted by the carpet idea, that you can walk on it, feel and see things directly!» (Granada) One visitor, who liked to lie on the carpet, was disappointed, as the work «stuck to him/her» (Hallstavik). A couple of visitors stressed the combined effect of the physical and emotional experience: «This is great – I enjoyed the experience both physical of walking on the carpet & mental – thinking differently about daily life & its representation. –» (Manchester) Walking on the carpet could also be experienced as somewhat concrete trampling on another person’s life: «A special idea – to walk on another person’s life!» (University of Lapland)

An interesting experience referring to the other senses was conveyed by this feedback, where the hearing experience may be metaphorical: «– Standing on the carpet I can hear the voices of the family. –» (Manchester) Another metaphor used was a journey: «Seija / a fascinating journey – I tried to be systematic in tracking your days but some of the images attracted attention – could spend hours gaining different insights. Amazingly resilient surface too. –» (Manchester)

#### 4.4 Hunting for the meanings: why was this ever done?

The most important feedback for this study is that of the *meaning searchers*. Here, comments interpreting the theme were a little bit more common than those considering the manner of expression. In the following, I will not make a distinction between these two, as it is not central to the study.

Under «meaning searchers» I placed also such feedback which indicated that no theme was found or the work was not understood. It is hard to say if these writers really concentrated on interpreting, but they do convey that people feel the work should be understood: «Why on earth?» (The University of Lapland); «What the hell is this rubbish about!!!!» (Amsterdam)»-. Congratulations! But I do not know what it is.» (Granada)

#### 4.4.1 *Your life is like my life*

My intention was to make the carpet in the spirit of the slogan «the personal is political». I make my private life public. By doing this, I aim at portraying my life as depicted in the carpet - the life of a mother working outside the home and having two small kids - on a more general level. The viewer may compare the collection of photos to his/her own life, and ask if there are many or some similarities, and if so, why. The work goes beyond the general taboos of family photography, such as the prohibition on depicting nakedness, and also shows some of the parts of life that often are absent in the family photos, such as the daily work at home and outside of it. In the responses, one can see many approaches to the topic of private and public: «A great quilt. It is exciting to see how the most private is most common. But I can only find the meanings when I know the people in the photos.» (University of Lapland)

One writer structured his/her text to refer to the theme of the work, i.e., that it tells about other lives in addition to that of its maker: «I think the carpet is a very original way to describe what goes on in (your) daily live(s). ->» (Amsterdam) Some people stated directly that the work corresponded with their own lives: «Very different experience. A good reflection on modern life, could easily be mine.» (Manchester) Especially viewers with children found it close to them: «- as a mother of two kids there is a lot that is familiar to me in these photos, as well the lovely cheek cleaned and warmed in the sauna as well as the daily life that makes one anxious. It is easy to recognize the situations. Is this really Your life? Or mine? — » (Rotterdam) Also its effects were pondered: «Daily life depicted from many angles, familiar to me as well. Did it help to analyze your own daily life better? Did it give a point of view that is not possible to see in the photos?» (Muurola) Order was found in the chaotic, familiar life:

Exciting sequences from the daily (?) life of a Finnish family. It is easy to sink in the photo bath. That is a way to a strange, but very familiar universe. Order emerges from the chaos, the chaos of life is just arbitrary. It strikes me that only the kids dare to go on the carpet. (Rotterdam)

One shifted the theme from the level of a single family to a more general level, to the meaning of a family in the world: «The carpet is the most original way I have ever seen to represent the ordinary life this family is living as well. I wish all the families were as united as this. For me the carpet represents a family spread all over the world. – » (Granada) The was also seen uniting people more generally: «Seija – Your work reminds me of Karl Jung’s universal subconscious; The personal becomes the universal – The universal becomes the personal – Terrific –» (East Carolina)

People saw family life contains good and bad: «I would call it a home with two kids, daily life, which is not usually shown to the others but just lived inside the home – The sad, hard, enjoyable, difficult things —» (Granada) Even poetical interpretations emerged: «— oh, these days of ours; / if they were not built by the dark stripes as well / there was no hope for the bright colors to glow —» (Muurola) Some emphasized my showing private matters in addition to the theme: «You need to be brave to show a series of photos telling about your personal day and night. This is the way life is. —» (Muurola) Showing the private may also have caused the feeling of having «Big Brother watching you»: «A child of the age of Big Brother?» (Rotterdam) It is also possible that this person was referring to the tv-series as (s)he had a possibility to peep to my life.

#### 4.4.2 *The typical family photographs and their «innocence»*

According to me, the maker of the installation, the main theme of The Enchanted Carpet of the Holy Daily Life is to be an anti-collection of typical family photographs, which are centered around rituals, holidays and documenting progress (Ulkuniemi 2005). The over seven hundred photos that make up the carpet recall the feature of family photos: hundreds and hundreds of them are constantly taken. We also have a hard time in trying to find out what is essential as we are surrounded by a mass of pictures all of the time. In my experience, life in a family is also very chaotic – the chronological order of things disappears. Discussion connected with family photography – or the center of it, i.e., the family – appeared in much of the feedback.

The work was interpreted judging the values of life: «It’s a nice idea to show your personal life in this way. Children seem to play the most important role in a human’s life.» (Amsterdam) It was even interpreted to be a group work connected to child care/ protection: «I think the work was done by a group of people in the field of child protection teaching hygiene, nutrition and social relations... I think it is really about human work.» (Granada) The work was also seen as depicting the close relations between the family members: «As I saw this, I told myself how great it is to connect the photos like that,

imitating a carpet, where humility, tenderness and affection for others are present.» (Granada)

The significance of photos as keepers of the moments of happiness also emerged from the responses: «There are moments in your life that flee from you, and you will never get them back and be able to enjoy what you experienced and how happy you were then. Your mural helps you to get back those special moments with your family. –» (Granada)

The ability of the photograph to freeze time was the focus of the feedback of one visitor with a baby:

– The photo stops time – when you are hushing your baby in the pram you understand the ticking of the clock so concretely. The carpet is worn out in time as well. Thinking about the meaning of the photos as preservers – (University of Lapland)

The documentary nature of a photograph was also referred to and the viewer's own life was reflected in the work: «– For me these photos are documents of things that have happened, daily life in the Ulkuniemi family.– Will my daily life one day be about the same?» (Muurola) In contrast to the documentary feature, another writer stresses the use of photographs in awakening memories and the imagination:

As we look at this, the fantasy world pops up, in which our memories are connected with the photos. The dreams (of being able to live another kind of life, with other people, to be able to help, to be helped) will come true, at least in the mind... everything is possible in the imagination. In addition to this we can observe, compose, create a new kind of reality and in that way get to know a world that exists, but in which we are not living. (Granada)

One writer was wondering about the effect of photographing in my daily life, and stressed the power of the camera to influence behavior:

– The idea is simple but the actual practice of photography, especially of people, can be quite hard, as you yourself observe. By this I mean that when you are aware of the camera you can't help acting upon this. At times it must be an intrusion upon your daily life while at other times it may be fun/interesting. Personally I find photography fun because the pictures can either represent something or mean something or show just the spirit of that special moment in time. – (Manchester)

Another writer poses a question that reflects his/her assumption that the photographing may have changed the behavior of the family members: «An honest day, but did the photographing affect the day?» (Muurola)

One person, who in the beginning of his/her feedback presented him/herself as a student of history, discussed the meaning of snapshots and especially their «innocence»:

– The things (these) snapshots can tell about everyday life and ideals of certain people in a certain period of time. The pictures (that is snapshots in general) are taken quite unconsciously, but at the same time many ideals and cultural baggage come forward through them (as you wrote: at what times/events are they taken, what is left out of the picture, etc.) Over several years these pictures might be used to reconstruct the past, as we use archives, bills, etc., nowadays in historical research. They will be used as and considered less objective sources than archives (as documents such as diaries and letters are now). They are very personal, but this might give a good insight into what we find important to keep/remember and the way we keep and remember things. We have to be critical as to how consciously pictures have been taken and with which goal. How «innocent» and pure are they? Because these series, even though the snapshots look very authentic, has been made with a certain purpose as well. (Amsterdam)

Other comments referring directly to family photography dealt with the photos as documenting parties and other celebrations:

– And it is true that the photos (family -) are always taken at the time of a celebration, etc. First I thought about chaos – then I heard that was the point! When my eyes got used to it, I started to notice all the nice and beautiful things! – (Rotterdam)

Some viewers noticed the sterility of albums: «An achievement of display – it shows the sterility of what we all do with our ‘personal’ histories by our sewing them in albums. The personal made public in a manner which is unique yet public (or public yet unique).» (Manchester) The writer who says he/she has had the following kinds of thoughts before visiting the exhibition and being delighted when noticing the same kind of message in this work encouraging us to change the style of photographing:

Great! Many people have albums full of things one thinks one wants to remember: birthday parties, celebrations, happiness, experiences... endless artificial smiles. Life becomes unreal, experience searching. If we really photographed in our albums what life truly is... maybe our grasp of reality would be better. Maybe we would accept life as a whole better → The things would be meaningful as such, not only measured by their ability to offer pleasure. (University of Lapland)

Some felt the photos could be included in a contemporary family album: «Oh how there is hurry and haste. Though the photos are taken by snapping, they (most of them) are pretty well framed. They would suit many a real family album. Family life is wonderful and terrible.» (Muurola) The work also encouraged viewers to reconsider their own way of



photographing: «This really makes one think of daily life and preserving oneself/one's daily life in photos. –» (Muurola)

#### 4.4.3 *From trampling on daily life to appreciating it*

I also considered one of the main themes of the work being the meaning and importance of daily life. The carpet metaphor refers mainly the traditional women's handicraft, such as rugs made of old clothes. Sewing the photos together is related to the mosaic quilts that are made of rejected pieces of cloth. Also the floor mosaics of the churches and the praying carpets one kneels on have affected my carpet. Kneeling may lead one to experience what I want to convey with my work: daily life is valuable, unique. Nowadays the photos are consumed – as time: you have to feel good. One is supposed to use the photo carpet as well: one may step on it without shoes on. That way one may concretely understand the current trampling of one's daily life. I want to offer a physical experience of touching and getting close. To see the photos more clearly, one has to make an effort. One may leave in the work, as in other people, signs of lived life. Time is passing; life is passing; everything is passing, slowly changing and then disappearing.

The discussion of the theme of daily life came up in many of the responses. In one of them, daily life was considered mainly through how mundane and nonsensical what we do is: «Well, the life of a man is a kind of tinkering» (Hallstavik) One of the writers criticized the title of the work, which refers to the holiness of daily life. According to him/her it was too religious: «And...why this? If most of us are atheists!!!» (Granada) The carpet could also be seen as a therapeutic tool that helps one put up with the difficulties of daily life: «Its terribly neat, a most original carpet! If you have any bad moments, you can walk over them!!!» (Granada)

The concreteness of the act of walking, trampling, was present in the comment questioning the right to walk over the carpet: «Well, this is daily life, not so strange for anyone, but still, is it something to walk over?» (University of Lapland) Some of the responses discussed the theme poetically: «The whole busy life-spectrum / wandering in photos of a man / Whatever it offered us / is told in these pictures thus.» (Muurola)

The work was also read as «a still movie» dealing with daily life: «I am standing in the middle of a stopped movie of daily life; flashes of daily life; peepings, moments, quiet fuss. –» (Muurola) Another writer using the metaphor of «a movie» emphasized the variety of daily life, and by concentrating picked up some meaningful sequences in the chaos:

You revolutionizing daily life! Think that the days can contain so many colors, so much movement, order, chaos! After a couple of minutes' concentration, I see your photos as movie sequences. It is nice that many photos are upside down, as this offers me the opportunity to disregard the effect of the people and notice the feeling of the moment instead. Think that a water tap can look so aesthetic! I also could laugh or at least smile every now and then, especially at the photos which were «overloaded» (washing machine – kitchen sink – putting the clothes on in the hall) and oh how lovely it was to end up on the jogging path for recreation! – (Hallstavik)

The chaos of the daily life of a working mother was brought out in some of the feedback: «It's a very good, special, original way of showing the chaos a working mother is living in. It is impossible to see the details. →» (Rotterdam) The carpet also brought some order to the chaos, and by taking time it became possible to see something that might otherwise be ignored: «Order out of chaos. Initially the carpet looks confusing but time spent really looking pays off. A reflection of how life is really. Take time to really look around and you may see something you hadn't noticed before, and, who knows, even like it.» (Manchester) «It helped to realize the importance of daily life: --. I enjoyed in particular the narrative quality of the piece and the interesting juxtapositions made between the various images. A wonderful unpacking of everyday life' – importantly making it into something extraordinary! →» (Exmouth) Facing daily life, even if it is rough, was stressed by the writer who also suggested an alternative way of realizing the work: «– What if the size of the photos was monumental? DAILY LIFE as monumental art! FACE everyday life! Do not try to escape it, it is not possible.» (Rotterdam)

Sometimes the importance of appreciating daily life was connected with the discussion of the limits of the family albums:

According to me, the idea of a carpet where you have the daily life tells us a lot and shows us a lot more than a family album. I think that it is a good way to tell how we are doing, how to appreciate the daily life. By simply kneeling down we will be able to see any important moment that can happen to us and which is common to all cultures. (Granada)

One writer emphasized the importance of noticing the value of the moments: «Sometimes we think that our life is monotonous and boring, but when you see one day step by step you will notice how intensive and exciting it really is.» (Granada) Another one remarked on the ability of the work to show emotions: «It is incredible! It is a carpet that is loaded with emotions. Sometimes one does not notice them, but here they become clearly visible. —» (Granada)

The carpet was compared to a book in which you can read the story of another person's life. The metaphor was connected also with the difficulty of trampling on the work:

How can you make a book out of a carpet? Many levels. To fly with a magic carpet – with a magic book. While flying, one sees the other person's daily life among the holy days. Somehow I feel bad trampling on another person – you do not step on a book either. It moves me that one can get so close, deep, even though there are no words. The book/carpet has a center. Sauli's son is reading the carpet book on his knees with his teddy bears. (Hallstavik)

One writer discussed a lot how easy it is to forget the essence of daily life: «It strikes me how blind we become to our daily lives. Looking in this daily life I understand how tight daily life is. All the choices that are not visible when viewed from the outside. If someone had asked about these two days, if there was something special that happened, the answer would probably be: «no, nothing, just the same as always» or something like that.» The writer goes on to mention how all the choices people make are reflected in the photos: «They (the photos) tell about the choices of the house, colors, landscape, husband, (unconscious?) genetic choice for the kids. Choices of how much to reveal in a photo. The attitudes towards nudity, relations to the hypothetical colleagues (- the gazes, gestures), the choices of culture (- the sauna, working with the stones) on so on.» He/she concludes by discussing the uniqueness of daily life:

In my case the deeper understanding means to see daily life as a unique fingerprint. Maybe nothing more special than anything else. But totally specially unique and unrepeatable. From this idea to realization, to reach the goal of giving value to one's own daily life is almost impossible but for sure it is absolutely necessary to be able in general to appreciate and give value to the life we are living here on the earth. (Härnösand)

I suppose the poetic writer also stresses the same kind of special feature of our existence, the possibility to make choices:

And as if in my writings/then photographic cries/no pantomimed pleasures/arithmetic more to sequential thoughts/and where how to survive/a magical toast/a constructional prize/and there and after/what more may be done/is left to me/and my right to choice/I wish/I was/I were/I am! (Rotterdam)

#### 4.4.4 *Different point of views and repetition are part of life*

The photo carpet can be «read» line by line. It is not possible to see the photos Savanna has taken right side up along with those I have taken. By making «the

reading» more difficult, I want to indicate that the perspectives of the photographer and the photographed are always separate. They always give a different view on the same object – in this case, my life. This would be so even if the photos had been taken at exactly the same moment. Some of the viewers commented on the sewing of every other photo upside down: «A mosaic which questions objectivity & selection – Good to see the ordinary in this way.» (Manchester); «A useful way of looking at life in two perspectives and how the ‘mundane’ world looks different for two people. –» (Manchester); «The carpet is very interesting and touching. It is nice to see the perspectives of two people on the same thing, as usually in life; you are not watching things alone.» (Exmouth)

There was a text where the writer imitated the carpet by writing every other word upside down which I found very interesting. For me the text is about the importance of being able to see things in a new way: «Instead of seeing things as we all know they are, there would not be exhibitions like this. – » (Granada)

Some people found the form of representation a good metaphor for life: «Seija, so many people in so many views – it is like life. People pass by and to and away. So much is happening that we can only look perhaps every 10 minutes...perhaps less because we remember the images we just saw. –» (East Carolina) One interpretation of my using the double shots was that they represented the moments that were particularly valuable: «Is it with a purpose you use the double photos with the same motif? Are these especially important photos? Moments that are made doubled? –» (Härnösand)

#### 4.5 Refers to the art world: pure art of daily life?

*The comments referring to the art world were few. Most just referred to it by using the single word «art»:* «Congratulations on this exhibition, which shows totally naturally, without any prejudice, the way of living of one family enjoying life and each other. It is pure art!» (Granada); «– Walking in the shade was something really great, I did like it a lot! The idea is really good, creative, original. You are a real artist!» (Granada); «It is good that you make art of daily life!» (Rotterdam)

Sometimes the feedback that considered the work art also contained discussion of the message:

The best thing we leave here when departing this life is the family. I think your family is great. Congratulations to you on it and that you have been able to connect it with this kind

of original work of art that lets you get close to it and invites us to become acquainted with your life. – (Granada)

Maybe my making visible the private is the answer to the question asked in the following feedback: «Seija, why can we see “simple” photos here and find them so provocative? You are a fine artist.» (East Carolina)

Only one of the comments *situated the work in the field of art*, but without giving any reason or specifying its relation to anything but time: «The carpet was a part of the art of modern times. Great imagination!» (Hallstavik)

## 4.6 Sincerely yours – personal comments to the artist

Of the *personal comments* addressed to me, the most common were different kinds of *greetings and encouragement*, which also were included in much of the feedback I have placed in other groups. The following are examples of feedback that only contained personal comments: «Good, Seija!» (New York); «Thank you for your effort!» (Amsterdam); «It was nice to see this creation of yours, Seija.» (Muurola); «Hurray to the carpet!» (Granada)

Some of the comments were connected to my *character*, such as my courage in showing my personal life: «I like the idea. Very nice, but I think it is very deep in your own privacy. Very brave to show so much of your personal life.» (Amsterdam) The positive features conveyed by the work were stressed: «Unbelievable guts – the power to stand the repetitive work – the ability to see the beauty of daily life – the creative, new way of connecting – a person working at a desk in her beginning, this moment! →» (Muurola) One writer captured his/her thoughts in a question on the position of the producer of the work; am I an object being photographed or objective when photographing: «The weaver of the enchanted carpet – an object or -ive?» (Muurola)

## 4.7 Commenting off the focus

Some of the *comments* were *drawings*. There were only a few of these, and their themes varied from an animal to a heart, flower/spiral to a man's genitals. The connection the drawings have with the work is hard to interpret. They may be positive or negative comments on it. But to me they seemed more to be drawn to kill time.

Other comments were mainly the «*comments on the comments*» written at the University of Granada, e.g. «Do not care about that one, he/she is impertinent». One of the comments from Hallstavik is an exception. There the writer, after describing her busy life and praising the idea of the work, focused on making remarks about the people looking at the carpet:

--. Comments from the curious spectators of the carpet: «What is the person waiting for there? Waking up or...?» «Do you know anyone? That one looks like Julia.» «That little boy is really everywhere.» «That one also looks like Julia.» «So you see Julia everywhere.» «Here is also a photo that looks like Julia. Two eager boys are examining each of the photos closely, commenting and making questions. (Hallstavik)

## 5. Conclusions: from a viewer of the work to its interpreter and a developer of ideas

The diversity of the open feedback made analysis of the response very challenging. However, I think I have succeeded in extracting some of the essential elements from the spectrum of feedback, such as its concentrating on describing the formal qualities of the work. Here, respondents often included comments on the quality of the work, especially the originality of the work or «the idea», or on how the work was realized.

Most of the responses were positive – maybe because they were public. Writing also takes effort, which probably was too much for those who found the work unworthy. The viewers writing responses primarily wanted to encourage the producer of the work, but there were some who took out their frustration on the book, when they did not find any meaning in the work. Most of the emotions that the work evoked were positive, but some people felt anxiety when encountering it.

Some viewers wanted to participate by making suggestions for how to improve the presentation of the work; others concentrated on empathizing with it. Many of the comments searching for the meaning of the work were profound, and prompted new discussion. These both addressed the themes of the work and took the idea further, with the work regarded as stimulating and giving a start to something new: thoughts, emotions or action.

The grouping of the types of the open responses I developed may be used in other studies focusing on the responses of the viewers. I am convinced not only art educators but also artists would benefit from encouraging the viewers to stop and give their comments on the works. Fortunately this has lately become more popular.

As an art educator who is a teacher, artist and a researcher, I tried with my installation to make the viewers pause and think about the genre of family photography and their lives. According to the responses I did succeed with many of them. Some of the viewers even started to think about new ways of using their photographs.

An important part of this experiment, where the installation served as kind of a visual lecture, was the importance of the viewers to be the co-creators. By sharing their interpretations to other viewers and me they gave it multiple meanings. They did take the work to new dimensions with their comments. Their text became part of the work. People encountered the work as the world of education in general: from their current personal position, getting and giving.

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## APPENDIX 1

THE QUANTITAVE DISTRIBUTION OF THE DATA IN DIFFERENT TYPE GROUPS IN EACH OF THE EXHIBITION PLACES

**TABLE 1.**  
**The division of the feedback (in total 249) at each of the exhibition venues.**

<b>THE TYPE GROUP/ Location &amp; time of the exhibition</b>	1A	1B	2A	2B	3A	3B	4A	4B	5A	5B	6A	6B	7A	7B	Total
The Library of Muurola, Finland (10.-31.12.1996)*	6	2	2	1	3	-	7	6	-	-	2	2	1	-	32
The Main Entrance Hall of the University of Lapland, Finland (22. - 29.3.2001)	3	1	-	1	5	1	4	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	17
The Library of Hallstavik, Sweden (8.-12.6.2001)	-	-	-	-	1	3	1	2	-	1	-	1	1	1	11
The Library of Härnösand, Sweden (15.6.2001)	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	7
The Main Entrance Hall of the Vrije University in Amsterdam, The Neatherlands (24.10.2000)+	4	1	-	1	4	-	3	2	-	-	1	1	-	-	17
The Hall of the Sailors' Church in Rotterdam, The Neatherlands (27. - 28.10.2000)*+	2	2	4	1	-	-	3	4	1	-	3	-	-	-	20
The Birley Gallery of Manchester Metropolitan University, UK (11. - 12.5.1999)*+	2	2	-	-	-	1	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
The Entrance Hall of the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK (12.5.1999)+	2	3	-	-	2	3	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	14
The Entrance Hall of the University of Exmouth, UK (20.5.1999)+	9	4	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	16
The Stairway of the Faculty of Education in the University of Granada, Spain (23. - 30.4.2002)	26	12	5	3	2	2	14	6	4	-	2	1	2	6	85

Hotel Marriot Marquis in New York, U.S.A. (22. - 23.8.2002)	3	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	7
The Gallery of the University in East Carolina, U.S.A. (26. - 30.8.2002)	2	2	3	-	2	-	2	2	1	-	1	-	-	-	15

\* = With the video

+ = I was present as monitor