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*Bel far niente?
Photography as Productive Play in Creative Cultures
of the 21st Century¹*

Introduction: Toys on camera

In time of the iconic turn, ludic practices are increasingly affecting our understanding of the camera and mobile devices with camera functions as «toys» and online photo management services such as Flickr and Instagram as «playgrounds». (Fig. 1) As shared on these platforms of social media, amateur images invite us to join in the game of mimetic practices where photographs of others come to have an effect on how we perceive, document and represent the world through photography. At the same time, toy photography, or «photoplay», presents itself not only a playful activity involving appropriation of miniature objects, but rather, a popular form of adult play in which character toys such as dolls, action figures and soft toys are photographed both in the intimate interiors of homes, but also in environments traditionally considered as non-play sites: public spaces such as tourist sites (toy tourism).

By addressing the role of lens-based media as a means to conduct and capture play acts with toys, we are able to witness the formulation of creative and productive amateur practices in photography. By analysing toy-related photography, we are also able to detect increasingly gameful play patterns in relation to toy play and to gain a richer understanding of both digital and material dimensions contemporary toy cultures. Finally, by reading the results of this photoplay, i.e. the visual, playful and artistic data as both evidence, documentations and outcomes of photographic play, we may deepen our understanding of the power of photography as an increasingly ludic medium.

Toys with a face – so called «character toys» – have found their way to the hearts, toy closets and experiences of players of all ages. Contemporary

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doll play does not necessarily limit itself to manipulative interactions with the toy, but extends to both multiple media platforms and physical playgrounds, when cameras are appropriated in play scenarios. Adults, as well as children are simultaneously playing with their toys and cameras not only in public spaces such as urban environments (e.g. tourist sites and monuments) and natural surroundings, but in the intimacy of built play environments such as doll houses and dioramas in domestic spheres. Furthermore, photoplay, once shared online on Flickr, Facebook or Instagram, functions as evidence and documentation of the otherwise ephemeral toy play activity. (Fig. 2)

Play made visible: Doll play on multiple platforms

Montola considers play as momentary and vanishing – after playing ends it may be difficult to get hold of it without reports, photographs or artefacts created or used in play². Play – both the playing of games and playing with toys has become more performative thanks to developments of social media platforms and services. At the same time, play is often recorded and then shared with mobile devices including cameras and with the help of apps. On social media, play becomes more perceivable as both toy play and playing of games is documented during the activity.

In the activity of photoplay, the camera becomes on one hand a needed extension of toy play and because of this, on the other hand, a toy in itself.

In *Man, Play and Games* (1961, orig. *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, 1958), Roger Caillois defines play as a voluntary, special, undetermined and unproductive activity, which is both regulated and imaginative. Caillois categorizes play in the forms of competition (*agôn*), games of luck (*alea*), mimicry and vertigo (*ilinx*)³. Out of these categories, doll play fits best in the category of mimicry, as when ‘dollying’ players mimic and repeat ‘plots’ familiar from either everyday human life or transmedia-related narratives originating either e.g. in works of art, literature, television, films, comic stories – or toys. The doll as the image of the human being and as an anthropomorphized object functions as an instrument for storytelling that enables, when employed in play, identity play through explorations of the self. The doll in this way, becomes a supplementary actant, in many case also a fantasy (and

² M. MONTOLA, *On the Edge of the Magic Circle* (Academic Dissertation), Tampere University Press, 2012, p. 74.

³ R. CAILLOIS, *Man, Play and Games*, [Orig. *Les Jeux et les Hommes* published 1958], The Free Press, Glencoe 1961, ix–x.

miniature) version of oneself, a so-called «mini-me».

Caillois' other definition and distinction on play forms is based on the idea of ludic and paedic play. *Ludus* refers to play which has game-like structure employing rules, *paidia* spontaneous, less formal type of play. Leaning on Caillois' articulation of *ludus*—*paidia*, doll-play with Blythes (the doll played with in the photographs of this article) as appropriated in photoplaying activities of adults, appears to fit best under *paidia*. Contemporary doll play could well be interpreted as following these non-descript, but socially negotiated and modified rules as it includes some competitive characteristics, yet no clearly articulated winning conditions.

An additional question of interest here is the one considered with the supposed unproductive nature of play. Caillois sees play as unproductive, even though he describes it as regulated and imaginative. Photoplay as one form of doll play represents, on the contrary, also a *productive* form of play, which results in photographs of toys⁴. As such, it supports the idea presented by Helenius and Lummelahde, according to whom the meaning of the outcomes of play increases depending on the age of the players⁵. Blythe dolls⁶, the dolls used as a case example of character toys in this article, have gained popularity among an adult audience especially through socially shared photoplay in the Internet. The playful affordances of Blythes are multifaceted: As a type of «adult toy», the function of Blythe not only as a collectable object, but more interestingly as a plaything affording various types of self-expression becomes relevant.

In adult toy play, customized dolls are dressed up, accessorized and after that photoplayed with in different situations and environments. Through the toy users (hobbyists and players) and fan communities interested in Blythe, the plaything in question becomes a surface for reflection for emotional states and evaluation of the playful affordances of the doll in both solitary and social play. The narrative artefact⁷ continues its multiple lives in the toy stories documented, shared, circulated and discussed on the visual and verbal platforms of various social media applications.

⁴ K. HELJAKKA, *Lelukuvasta kuvaleikkiin. Lelukulttuurin kuriositeetti ja kaksoisrepresentaatio valokuvassa* [From Toy Photography to Photoplay. A curiosity in toy culture and double-representation in photography] in «Lähikuva» 4/2011, pp. 42–57.

⁵ A. HELENIOUS, L. LUMMELAHTI, *Leikin käsikirja* [The handbook of play], PS-kustannus, Jyväskylä 2014.

⁶ See <<http://www.thisisblythe.com/>> (last accessed 09.26.2010).

⁷ See S. SELANDER, *Mekaniska såpoperor och narrativa artefakter*. [Mechanical soap operas and narrative artefacts], in Id., *Arbetspapper inom projektet Toys as communication*, Halmstad: Högskolan i Halmstad, NCFI 1999.

Often a character toy, such as a contemporary doll like Blythe, is because of its size and compactness often an object which can be carried around and outside the domestic sphere. The portable quality of a toy clearly adds up to its play value, as it allows playing to extend outside of traditional, domestic, realms of toy play. (Fig. 3)

Photoplaying in creative and productive playgrounds

On Flickr (<www.flickr.com>) one may find hundreds of thousands, even millions of toy-related photographs, where character toys extending from the hyper-real to the fantastic are depicted as collected objects, personalized artworks or as a part of visual and spatial photoplay in single or multiple images.

Saarikoski *et al.* formulate that playfulness appears to be a function that has attracted people to online activities from the times of its first appearance⁸. Thus, the Internet may be understood as a kind of playground⁹. Further, digital technologies seem also to stimulate playful goals¹⁰.

Thanks to the services provided by the Internet, digital media may be seen as a tool for creative functions – one that includes characteristics supporting collective play. Flickr, as one of the adult playgrounds online, enables the formation of playful communities. Kaplan and Haenlein describe Flickr as a content community¹¹. As such, it functions as an avenue for inviting play. In photoplay with Blythe as well as in other types of photoplay shared online, other players may participate in the evaluation of the aesthetic quality, humorousness and inventiveness by commenting. The sheer volume of toy-related photographs now perceived in e.g. Flickr may contribute to the growth and strengthening of adult doll play as a phenomenon. Inventive visual representations of Blythe may encourage new

⁸ P. SAARIKOSKI *ET AL.*, *Peliä ja leikkiä virtuaalisilla heikkalaatikoilla* [Games and play in virtual sandboxes] in ID. (eds.) *Funetista Facebookiin – Internetin kulttuurihistoria*, Gaudeamus, Helsinki 2009 pp. 234–264, p. 261.

⁹ E. SEITER, *The Internet Playground*, in J. GOLDSTEIN *ET AL.*, *Toys, games and media* (s. 93–108), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah (NJ), 2004.

¹⁰ Cfr. J. RAESSENS, *Playful Identities, or the Ludification of Culture*. «Games and Culture I», 1 (2006), pp. 52–57; G. VATTIMO, *Die Grenzen der Wirklichkeitsauflösung* [The limits of the dissolution of reality] in *Medien-Welten Wirklichkeiten*, edited by G. Vattimo, W. Welsh, pp. 15–26, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1998.

¹¹ J. SUOMINEN, *Johdanto – Sosiaalisen median aika* [Introduction – The time of social media] in *Sosiaalisen median lyhyt historia*, Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, Helsinki 2013, pp. 9–27.

players to acquire a doll of their own or to simply enjoy the photographs as aesthetic outcomes of play¹².

Play and perhaps in play only, may a child or adult be creative, says psychoanalytic Donald Winnicott¹³. Contrary to Caillois' view on play, the photoplay of adult can be understood as a productive activity to the part that it molds and renews the meanings attached to toys and becomes together with the play environment and avenue for extending the play affordance of the plaything itself. In play, an adult too is free to explore, create and be productive and in this way, experience the plaything in potentially unexpected ways¹⁴.

Creativity employed in toy play becomes perceivable through the concrete outcomes of photoplay and thus, not only a joyous activity for the player him or herself, but for others. Creativity in one player may also influence, through the photographed toy scenarios, other players joining in the «game». Moreover, telling the stories of toy characters makes it possible to explore ones creativity in both useless (autotelic) and purposeful (telic) ways.

Play and art have a lot in common: creativity, use of imagination, transformation and both metaphoric and associative thinking¹⁵. In our times of the ludic era, new media forms allow the fast and efficient sharing of various products of storytelling. The stories, e.g. delivered in a through photoplay as shared on social media, make it possible to see how toys have become a medium that operate within other media forms. The doll play patterns employing tools, such as cameras and mobile devices, together with social media and its various service platforms, is a social activity grounded in an ecology of play formed by the player, the toy(s) and the play environment. When considering the affordances of toys and environments, it is possible to see the player as an observer constantly monitoring and evaluating potential sites and situations for play. Photoplay manifests itself when the conditions are right; when both the toy and the camera can be played with in a suitable environment.

In sum, it is possible to think that contemporary dolls appeal to players because of their ability to deliver endlessly seeming possibilities to be wowed by and explored in play. Played productively both solitarily and

¹² K. HELJAKKA, *Nettisuhteita nukkeen. Blythe: Kummajaisesta kulttikamaksi* [*Digital bonding with dolls. From curiosity to a cult*] in P. SAARIKOSKI, U. HEINONEN AND R. TURTAJAINEN, (eds.), *Diginakkaus 2.0.*, Turun Yliopisto, Kulttuurituotannon ja maisematutkimuksen julkaisut XXXI, 2011, pp. 75–90.

¹³ D. WINNICOTT, *Play and Reality*, Routledge Classics, Abingdon 2005 (orig. 1971), p. 53.

¹⁴ HELJAKKA, *Lelukuvasta kuvaleikkiin*, cit.

¹⁵ L. PIIRONEN, (ed.) *Leikin Pikkujättiläinen* [*The Little Giant of Play*], Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, Helsinki 2004, p. 316.

socially, these toys become important vehicles to be used in self-expression, even identity play.

The trajectory from the souvenir nature of the toy medium in its pre-industrial phase has in the 21st century expanded to toy tourism carried out with the toy character as a travel companion. As the doors to the toy closets of adults are opening and the dolls brought to the public, it becomes possible to perceive and realize both the creative and productive nature of contemporary toy play. The camera and visual practices such as photography together with social media have all undeniable roles in this line of development.