

## **Ambiguity of (traffic) signs: Playfully interacting with place encouraged by a photoplay**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the case study of a project that investigated whether an art-based playful placemaking activity can cause individuals to reimagine the rules and expand the possibilities of public space. It studies how dynamics of place and signs may be shifted by giving a playful excuse to do so. The paper is based on a playful interaction called #playsign that took place during the spring of 2019 and presents examples, via images, of how new – even surreal - layers of perception of place can be enhanced. By enabling site-specific play and boosting ludic aesthetics, we can also generate a sense of attachment to a place.

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“Consider fun as the anchor of an aesthetics of play.” (Sharp & Thomas, 2019, p. 21)

### **#playsign - art based ludic intervention to places**

The #playsign challenge took place during the spring of 2019. It was first piloted in Finland with three volunteer test persons, then distributed online for international participation via Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms. Finally, it was performed as a 90-minute workshop with eight participants during CounterPlay, a festival held in April of 2019 in Aarhus, Denmark. During the two-month period of #playsign activities, 77 entries were received.

The idea of #playsign was rooted in the Finnish national character of obedience and peremptory belief in restriction. One can experience this by witnessing how a pedestrian never crosses the street on a red light, even when there are no cars. At the same time, Finns are masters of self-deprecating humour, with playful awareness and plenty of sarcasm. The twisted Finnish humor is often dry and subtle and relies on wordplay, confusion and misunderstanding for the punchline, as in the popular cartoon *Fingerpori* (Kurko 2017; Jones 2015, Finnish Comics Society, 2017). Related to the purpose of this ludic intervention, humour makes us think of articulations that would otherwise hardly cross our minds (Knuuttila, 2010, p. 37). The term ludic (from the Latin *ludus*, meaning play or playfulness) is often used in reference to playfulness as a broad human quality (Donoff, 2014, p. 2).

Combined with the author's previous successful project *Mätäsmetäs*, where famous forest-themed art was reinterpreted and photographed, this activity took reinterpreting to a more playful level by encouraging participants to freely misunderstand and have fun with even more iconic sources: traffic signs.

### **Playing with new meanings**

The impetus for introducing this activity was a desire to boost adult playfulness, based on Schiller's classical statement how 'Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays' (Schiller, 1967, p. 107). More recently Yue, Leung and Hiranandani (2016) pointed out how adult playfulness positively correlates with affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor and subjective happiness (Yue et al, 2016). Whitaker (2019) underlines the association between play and attachment and how the development of self-compassion can also be nurtured through engagement in creative play projects, as demonstrated by the many initiatives designed to improve social and emotional wellbeing. Proyer (2014) states that playfulness in adults and its relationship with the sense of humor strongly relates to a trait of cheerful engagement. This project's concept was motivated by a personal life philosophy: finding positive and amusing possibilities within situations and locations. The project's ambition was to increase adult play with ludic urban intervention, which, according to Donoff & Bridgman (2017), encourages spontaneous and undirected playfulness. They claim that playful urban design answers our innate need to explore, discover, experiment and even test our mental and physical boundaries. The urban environment as a 'play space' can offer ample opportunities for nurturing adults' innate playfulness (Donoff & Bridgman, 2017). An extra challenge was presented in the timing of the pilot phase in February, which in Finland is still a very dark, wintery and snowy month. Participants would need to be willing to interact with the play and not mind being soaked in the slush. As Donoff and Bridgman put it, at the intersection of basic pedestrian motivators, winter city design, and ludic cities, there is a place for interdisciplinary processes and design to change the way we approach urban walkability and the pedestrian experience.

The aspiration in the #playsign challenge was to change the participants' mindset into that of discovery,

defining signs in urban and rural spaces as friendly and playful obstacles, not just strict stipulations, and extending an invitation to something imaginary. As Sicart states (2014), the beauty of play resides in the tension of between control and chaos. The aim was to make connection with place and the phenomena of place-shaping and ludic turn, the moment at which the spirit becomes playful and is therefore more open to play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Heljakka, Harviainen & Suominen, 2017). This playful intervention was focused on place activism (Buser, Bonura, Fannin, & Boyer, 2013) by playing with regulations and taking their meaning in a new direction or to a new level. The overall supposition is that playing in places attaches the player to the location by providing a context through which emotional connection is formed.

Thus, this experiment and paper aimed to find new ways to gain understanding about the ludic interventions in places through play, rather than in a theoretical approach to play. It leans to Kane's (2012) statement that 'play will be to the 21st century what work was to the industrial age – our dominant way of knowing, doing and creating value'.

In play, the boundaries of normal reality are broken and an attitude which interprets and adopts reality anew is a conscious choice of the player (Riikonen, 2013, p.181). When playing, the player suspends belief, sets criticism aside and consents to sacrificing realism and logic for the sake of enjoyment. Accepting the unreal is a fundamental quality of play (Hein, 1968). What is typical of humorous works of art is the surprising and often also ideological articulation between material and content (Knuuttila, 2010, p. 40). Logic reminds one of surrealism, which produces exceptions to the expected by relying on existing, established meanings. Something completely new is placed in a location where there is usually something familiar, and this combination shakes up our thinking and forces us to think in a new way (Kaitaro, 2015, p. 80). The images that participants produced during the #playsign activity showed, in many cases, sensory engagements that expanded the understanding of the meaning of a space or a sign with a new, intellectual twist that illustrated participants' thinking from new perspectives and minds opened toward external narratives.

### **From boring spaces into meaningful places**

Contemporary urban streets are often over-functional, unimaginative, unsensuous and untethered to place (Edensor & Millington, 2018, p. 1019), yet people still organize and understand themselves through spaces and places where culture explains the encountered phenomena (Laitinen, 2004; Granö, 2014). In an optimal case, street design should be deployed to promote pleasurable social interaction, playful engagements, enhanced sensation and a deeper sense of place (Edensor & Millington, 2018, p. 1019; Innocent, 2019). But in most cases and places, that, unfortunately, does not happen. So we should play with what there is; in this case, the signs, that are normally installed to restrict our behavior. Early street signs originated as warning systems for bicyclers in the early 1800s. A skull and crossbones sign was a warning to cyclists of steep hills ahead. Signing systems were then developed for automobiles in the early 1900s by nine European governments which chose pictorial symbols to be used as a standard. A picture can convey a message much quicker than words, and certain

colours and shapes were agreed to have specific meanings (Buckingham, 2017; Orn, 2017). The quest in #playsign was to ask if we could change our collective attitude toward a space by giving new meaning to the traffic signs, transforming them from signs of constraint and restriction to beacons of liberation – a license to play.

This experiment was also driven by the idea that fun is described as when a person playfully engages with situation or object (Sharp & Thomas, 2019, p. 15). The #playsign experiment aimed to challenge the normal behaviour and perception of public spaces from just passing by and not really seeing. According to Duff (2010), to experience place is to be affected by place, just as it involves an active reckoning of the tactical opportunities and practical resources places invariably present (Duff, 2010, p. 881). The interaction with objects could provide people with an urban experience, making them aware of the environment, stimulating social interaction and inducing urban connectedness (Nijholt, 2017, p. 247). Places participate in creating both individual and collective identities and, by adding some playability, we can change perception of these places, re-choreographing their dimensions.

The affective atmospheres capture the emotional feel of place, as well as the store of action-potential, the dispositions and agencies potentially available in that place. The art of place-making, and the diverse practices that support and extend this art, serve to enmesh bodies in relational networks of meaning and belonging, of time and space (Duff, 2010, p. 890). At the same time, play often involves or leads to humorous situations, events, interactions and exchanges. To design environments that can lead to the autonomous creation of humorous events, a city or rural area becomes more playable (Nijholt, 2015, p. 2179). In a similar way, we can introduce dimensions of environmental products that encourage interactions, or events that have incongruities in location, date, period or participants. When discussing script overlap and script opposition, we can consider serial and parallel script invocations and various types of opposition (Nijholt, 2015, p. 2182). Shared sense of place can also be a motivation for action (Quinn & Vrieze, 2019). Giving new meaning to traffic signs and interacting with them, we could possibly assign new meanings to places and perhaps even open portals to a parallel playful universe.

### **Cameras as playthings and excuses for play**

In #playsign, the use of a camera was essential, both as a plaything and with photography as one of the play functions. The play cannot be completed without photography, and the camera becomes an essential instrument which both enables the play and creates the photoplay. Even though a camera may be thought of as a toy, its technology means that it also has a useful function in the play, one that goes beyond the immediate play function. It can be used to make pictures and share the play with a wider audience than the original players. From the perspective of the play, then, the camera is a kind of extension of its players, even if it is, at the same time, a toy to be used in the play (Heljakka, 2015). The camera, rather than functioning simply as a recorder of reality, becomes a tool of rambunctious imagination, in which the visual identifies with personal inspiration

and ambivalent pleasure, which is largely born of the tool itself (Kalha, 2016, p.19–21). Adults are expected to self-determinedly comply with social norms, without sanction or reminder (Detering, 2018, p. 263). To account for their play, adults therefore regularly resort to alibis, motivational accounts that deflect negative inference from their play behaviour to their character. Adults account for play as serving their adult responsibilities, be it that it serves communal cohesion or artistic expression; or be it that it is re-grounded as charity or a joke (Detering, 2018, p. 274). In #playsign, the camera also performed an important role as an alibi. Use of the camera and the performance of ideas were the primary concepts used in the play and its resulting visual formation which was shared using social media (Pearson, 2009; Östman, 2015). As Detering maintains, ‘we’re having fun while saving face’ (2018, p. 271).

## The analysis

The analysis phase of the harvested photos (n=77) started with content analysis. All of the entries were divided into five categories depending on the activity or intentions in the image.

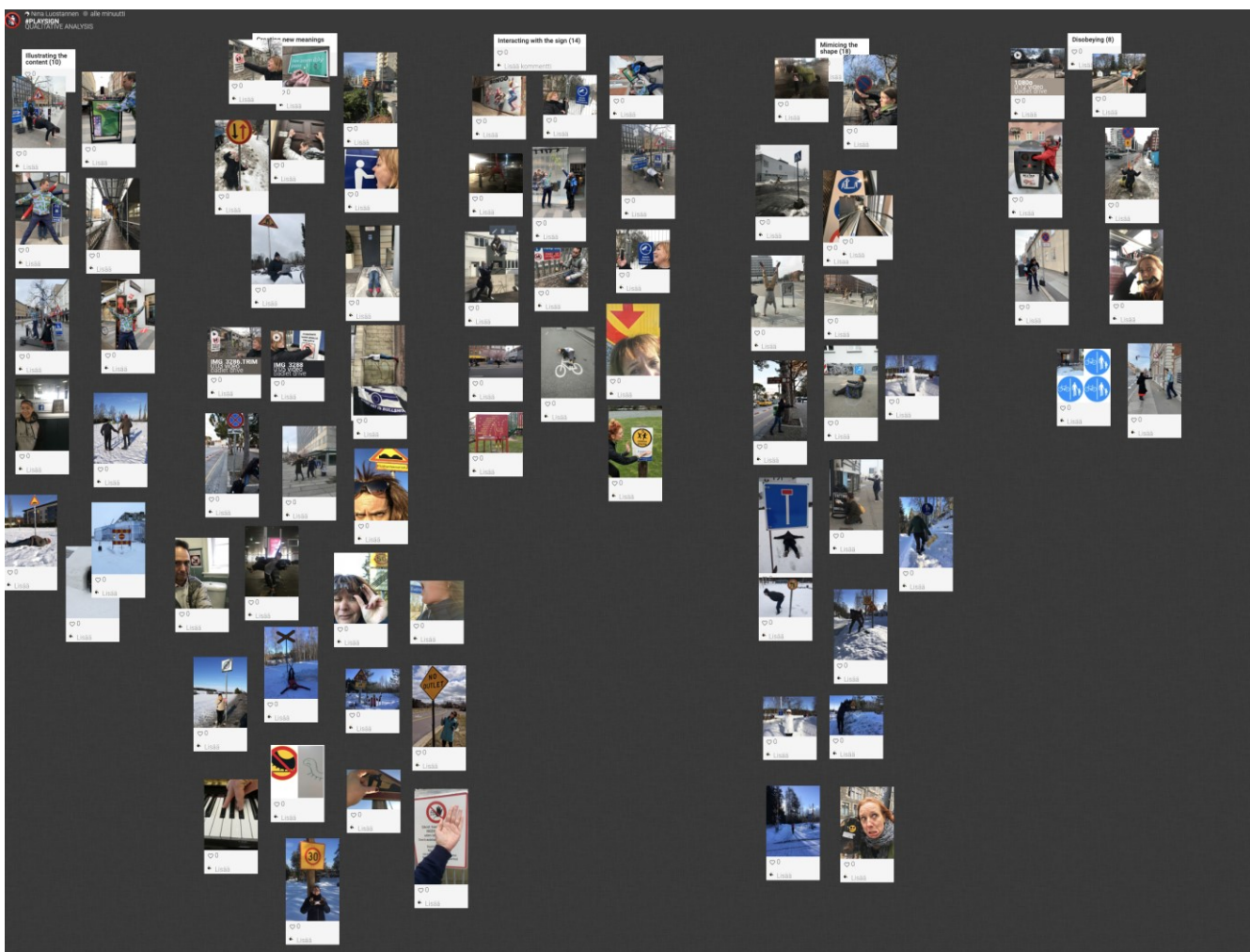


Image: The content analysis of all harvested photos.

The categories were:

- Illustrating the content (n=10)
- Creating new meanings (n=27)
- Interacting with the sign (n=14)
- Mimicking the shape (n=18)
- Disobeying (n=10)

In several cases, the themes in the photograph were overlapping and the entry could have been in two or more categories. Keeping the original purpose of this activity in mind, the reinterpretations were exhilarating. The participants seemed to have had fun with the signs in the space where their playful activity had taken place, and especially in re-imagining dynamic new interpretations of the static meaning of traffic signs.

A request to participate in a survey was also distributed to participants. Eighteen responses were received, which can be considered a respectable number since several photos were taken by the same person or groups. The overall feedback supported the original objectives of this activity. Only one of the respondents gave overall negative feedback. It must be noted that only those who liked the concept took part in the play. Also, responding to the survey was a voluntary action. Below are some quotations from the verbatim survey responses, along with a wordcloud made from all the replies:

“I cannot any longer drive to work without thinking what kind of images could be taken with the signs. The traffic signs that I earlier thought to be official and formal turned to be touchable and possible to make to be “mine”.”

*Respondent 3*

“It changed my way of observation as well as my bodied relation to environment. Even though I did not take so many photos I was playfully encountering urban artefacts also other than traffic signs. I started to see also advertisement as a way to control public space. Several creative activism acts are growing and glowing in my mind. Even I would not do anything these thoughts create a mindful space where I can be critically creative.”

*Respondent 15*



“The humorous aspect of PlaySign has encouraged me to look for other lighthearted ways to interact with my surroundings.”

*Respondent 1*

“In the beginning it felt difficult especially to touch the traffic sign. But pretty soon I forgot the obstacles and was carried away with playing by myself. I did not see the reactions of the others, because I was so concentrated to play.”

*Respondent 7*

### **A deeper look at selected photos**

After examining the entries in total, sorting them into categories and reading through the feedback, I took a closer look at selected photographs to let them ‘talk.’ The choice was agonizing since there were such a great number of images which entertained, amused and provoked me. I ultimately decided to rely on intentional intuiting (Raami, 2018)

Methodologically the activities performed during #playsign could be called adapted photovoice (Leavy, 2009). Participants took photographs, and in this essay I use them as a means of understanding them as they are, letting the images speak, and not interviewing participants apart from the survey. Visual texts, like photographs, are useful sources of information when participants have emotions, impressions, or perceptions that are difficult to put into words. We can view these artifacts as significant fragments of information that participants use to tell stories in a visual narrative method. The photographs are an important means of recording experiences, as well as a means of persuading the viewer about a particular aspect of the experience (Keats, 2009, p. 187-191). Semiotics has become a fundamental element in the critical and analytical vocabulary of visual culture. Recognizing meaning is actively produced through the process of visual reading. Meanings are made, not found. We use signs to give meanings to things, but in the same sense, everything can be assigned a sign value. We ourselves function as signs, and everything we do or say can be interpreted through those signs. The pictured object has its own existence which may be depicted as a sign, in this case the items which become visible in the photograph (Salked, 2014, p. 50; Peirce, 2001, p. 416). We can easily be seduced by the appearance of things and the photograph is a medium that tends to flatter. Through semiotic analysis we can see through appearance to the real relations which underly them (Salked, 2014, p. 61).

There are circumstances when it is both desirable and necessary to transmit unambiguous information – the road sign needs to say ‘stop’, not to ‘make up your own mind.’ The sign signifies realism, to emphasize not just the persuasive reality of the scene but the reality of the medium itself (Salked, 2014, pp. 63, 76-77). Bateson was (according to Sharp & Thomas, 2019, p. 12) not concerned with the fake or false in any Baudrillian sense of the postmodern simulacra or reality. He instead looked how fake or false signs could signal play and carry true meaning. That’s what ambiguity means when it comes to fun. This #playsign task was to turn the assumptions

of photography upside-down. Participants were asked to not depict reality, but surrealism and illusions. Players transformed the signs, meant to be understood unambiguously, into subjects of multi-dimensional approach, underlining the fictional and playful character in them.

Through the images I tried to find the photographers' mental representations, and through that aimed at reaching the sources of the original narrative subject matter (cf. Kuusamo 1996, p. 43; Nikula 2012, p. 17). I did not try to interpret the photographs as direct representations of events but rather as poetic or humorous images – as drafts which reflected the photographer's emotions and endeavours (Luukkonen, 2009, pp.131–135). In so doing, I consciously strived to detach myself from iconicity and indexicality (cf. Fiske, 1994, pp. 69–70). Each person looks at images from their own perspective and approach. The meaning of any image is actually produced by the viewer. This forms the selective focus with which each person's own method of reading is justified. For this reason, stopping in front of images, without taking in what they have to offer as given or pre-determined, is meaningful (Kalha, 2016, p. 8; Salked, 2014, p. 61). The study of the #playsign images followed Kalha's method of interpreting early twentieth-century strange and surreal pictures. No requirements were demanded of the images, rather the surface was accepted as a relevant frolicking field of imagination, associations and even magic. A surface is a rich texture, and the pleasure derived from pictures is just as individually psychological (titillation of the imagination) as it is more general visual satisfaction (titillation of the artistic senses). The secrecy of the enjoyment of images is, however, hidden in the fact that they never reveal the whole truth (Kalha, 2016, pp. 15–16, 27). Furthermore, all the photographs were framed and staged settings, pastiches or even parodies, underlining the critical relationship with the target object (Dyer, 2007; Suonpää, 2011).

Therefore, the choice was deliberate to not spoil the fun of visual discovery and epiphany of the viewer and write pages of semiotic analysis of each image and over-explain them from my own perspective, but to let the images talk with their powerful visual language. Simple information and the hint of interpretation of each is all that is provided. It is important for the perspective of the individual reader/gazer as viewer to be as justified as that of the author/reviewer. As Sharp & Thomas maintain, ambiguity provides a space to find a meaning in an aesthetic experience because it demands work from a player. When set-outsideness provides a frame and the potential, and the ludic form provides the structure, ambiguity produces the meaning and experience of play (Sharp & Thomas, 2019, pp. 11). So please, play with the images in the pages of this article and discover their amazing ambiguity.





Photo: Jari Hautio

Location: Mynämäki, Finland

Mimicking the shape of the sign, but at the same time illustrating the deeper meaning of it: being in the dead end and not finding the way out of desperately grey and snowy landscape – or your life.



Photo: Nina Luostarinen

Location: Aarhus, Denmark

Even if the pedestrian zone is ending, Are you still allowed to walk if you are walking on your hands?



Photo: Anthony Schrag

Location: Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

In the feedback form, the participant wrote: "Fire, Assembling. I was just obeying the sign."

This is the kind of humour that keeps you entertained for a long time: indeed, this could also mean that here is the place for fire to assemble.

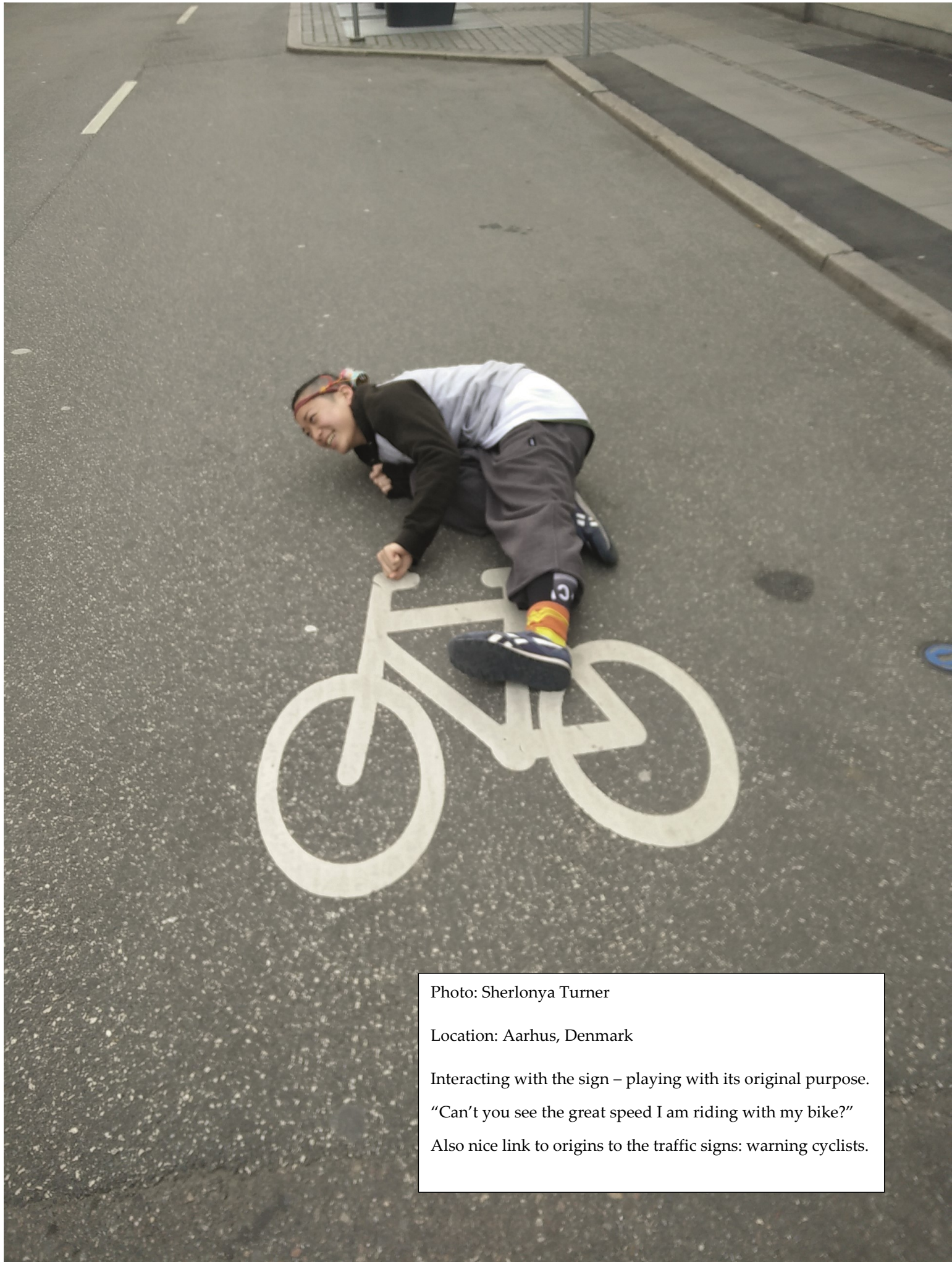


Photo: Sherlonya Turner

Location: Aarhus, Denmark

Interacting with the sign – playing with its original purpose.

“Can’t you see the great speed I am riding with my bike?”

Also nice link to origins to the traffic signs: warning cyclists.



Photo: David Cooper

Location: Powell, Ohio, USA

Does this sign really mean that I cannot charge my equipment here?



Photo: Paula Kostia

Location: Lieto, Finland

Is it a bump in the road or is it just illustration of me suggesting I should lose some weight? This photo beautifully depicts the Finnish sarcastic humour and also that you can make fun of yourself in public.

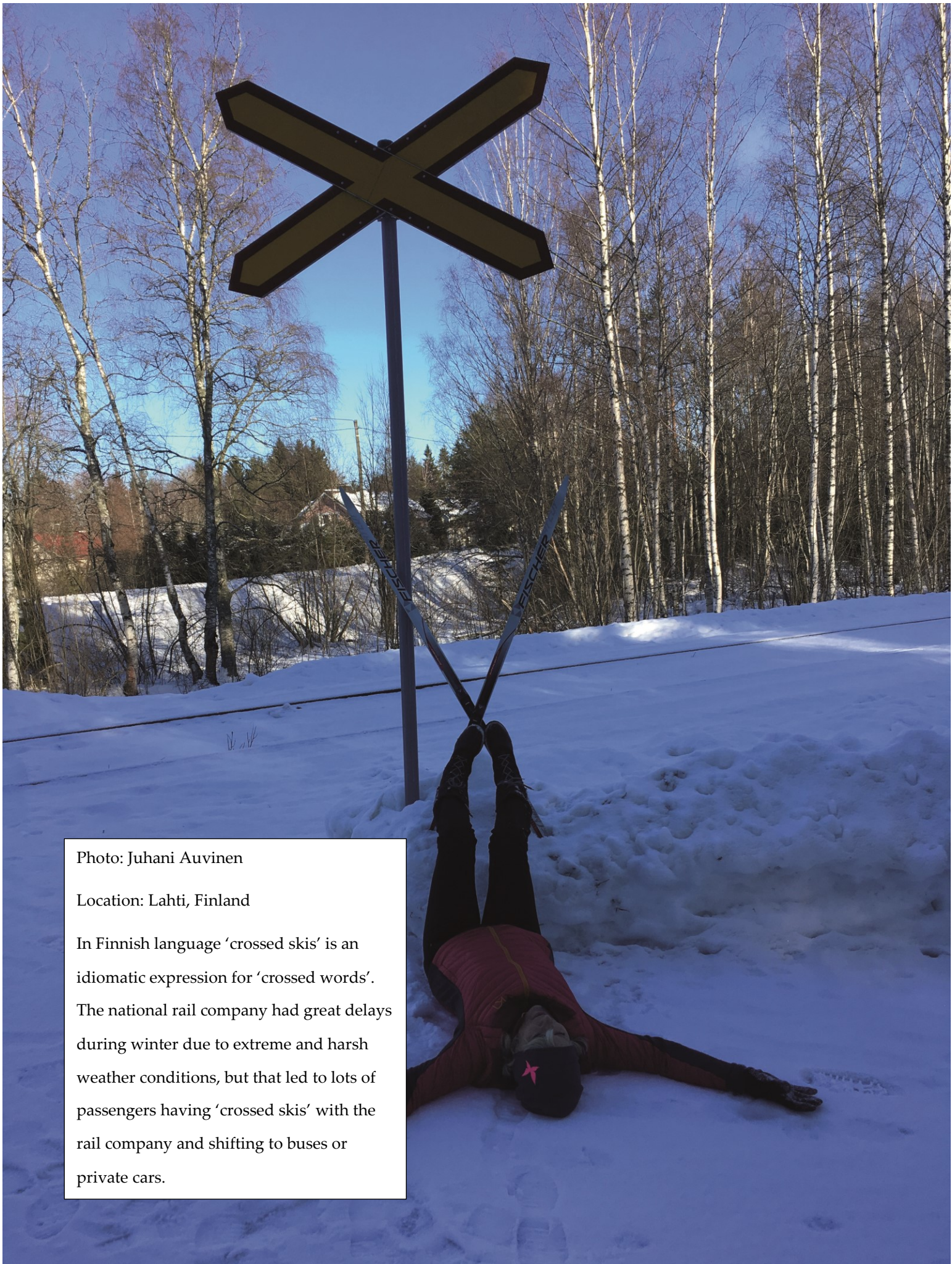


Photo: Juhani Auvinen

Location: Lahti, Finland

In Finnish language 'crossed skis' is an idiomatic expression for 'crossed words'. The national rail company had great delays during winter due to extreme and harsh weather conditions, but that led to lots of passengers having 'crossed skis' with the rail company and shifting to buses or private cars.



Photo: Mari Mäkitalo-Aho

Location: Tuusula

Another brilliant example of Finnish sarcasm attitude "I don't mind making funny of myself. Some signs of crackers are seen on my face."

Besides playing with the shape of sunglasses and shape of the traffic sign there is a "paving (surface) damages" subtext in this sign with which the participant is playing.



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## Discussion

In evaluating the original aspiration of an increase in discovering playable qualities of place by ludic interactions and reinterpretation of traffic signs, I see #playsign as a successful art-based activity and playful intervention. From the image entries, we can read enhanced discovery of the playable qualities of the surroundings and even the magical realism of places. After playing with the signs, one never sees these places – or the signs – the same way again. This activity enables emotional response and creates memories. I would suggest, that just seeing the result of play by others has an effect. Stopping to observe the produced photographs works as a ticket to a playful journey or as a portal to a parallel playable universe. A playful attitude can evolve not only by participating but also by admiring the visualizations that others have produced. We are providing fresh thoughts and new action models by sharing the images. The images possess strong power for visualizing the future.

#playsign enables spontaneous playing since it does not require preparation of any special equipment. It is also suited for solitary play and more introverted play. With this method, different kinds of channels of engagement work well. One can participate in the activity as part of a group or by just playing with one or two co-players. Most of the playful activities took place in urban surroundings, but several participants did this activity in rural areas. Since odd behavior is often more widely tolerated in urban environments, it is even more courageous to play in this manner in rural settings, where gaining the reputation of a village fool can easily happen. Using these activities as examples of the playable potential of places and spreading the idea by distributing the reinterpretations may catalyze a change in the perception of place and the aesthetics of play.

In this era of angst caused by huge societal and environmental challenges, we cannot ignore the importance of having and spreading fun. As the Fun Theory (2009) puts it, 'fun is the easiest way of changing people's behavior for the better.' The root of word fun (originally fon) relates to the word fond, meaning something for which we have affection. As early as the seventeenth century, we have two understandings about fun: an act of trickery, and something done with affection (Sharp & Thomas, 2019, p.30). I was most inspired by the number of reinterpretations which gave new meaning to the traffic signs, providing a much-needed joyful perspective, while inspiring hope and trust. By finding new meanings for signs, one can easily find new meanings for and perspectives about places, too. By being willing to act, perhaps the actor will discover new meanings for life itself. When playfully interacting with public spaces we might also be catalyzing and seeding change in action, which could possibly have greater impact than this fooling around might appear at first glance.

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I owe the most humble and delighted thanks to every participant of the #playsign challenge. Despite the weather challenges and strange looks from passers-by, you did throw yourself into play. I just love what you did, and especially the results. Thank you, also, for permitting me to use the photographs in this article.

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It is amazing to find that a kindred-spirited tribe of players actually exists, all over the globe. Together we can make a change.

‘Play gives us the world, and through play we make the world ours.’ (Sicart, 2014. p. 101)

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