



Participation by being: Teenage girls' hanging out at the shopping mall as 'dwelling with' [the world]



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I talk about young teenage girls' hanging out at the shopping mall. I approach hanging out as 'dwelling with' commercial spaces by thinking of it as 1) a meaningful practical engagement, and as 2) marking and claiming spaces as one's own. Hanging out with friends often goes on without much reflection, but it is deeply affectual. Because hanging out is wonderfully purposeless, space is cleared for the inspiring mood of enchantment. This receptivity can make 'dwelling with' possible. Hanging out can be conceptualized as playful being-in-the-world that allows for improvisations with one's surroundings in movement: an event of different rhythm, openness and experiment. By drifting at the mall, 'actively doing nothing', girls are open to the new and surprising. Therefore, hanging out can provide a momentary way out from the seriousness of adult life and make space for enchantment. A micro-atmosphere of play is produced when girls engage with the commercial space and artifacts. A kind of counter-politics of affect actuates from the intra-active play between girls and the things that matter to them. While hanging out, girls make temporary 'hangout homes' for themselves, and acquire situated rights to spaces by dwelling with them.

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1. Introduction

'That's where I feel most, like, free, you know, from adult supervision. It's almost like letting a dog off leash in an enclosed pen [laughing]. I think that's what my mom feels, or my dad feels most comfortable with.' A girl, 13 years.

In this paper, I approach teenage girls' hanging out as 'dwelling with' their everyday spaces, in this case the shopping mall, to address the often-overlooked minute human–material relations that have to do with this everyday phenomenon. Rather than providing any general account of teenage girls' hanging out in the US, the paper probes the potential for dwelling within the limitations of the highly normative consumption spaces. This happens through a conceptual analysis of the momentary playful engagements that the girls form with their material surroundings when hanging out at the mall. Empirically, the paper draws from a

participatory research project on young people's hanging out,¹ specifically from fieldwork that took place in San Francisco with ten girls (12–13 years).² Girls this age are often socially viewed as 'teenagers', despite being very young. The small research group in San Francisco was mixed in social-economic and geographical backgrounds, but eight of the girls identified themselves as 'white'. The experiences would have been very different if the participants were of different age or backgrounds, and if their bodies would have been racially marked, and thus labeled as 'unwelcome' at the mall (e.g. Cahill, 2007; Chin, 2001; Skelton, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2000). Serious political inequalities hence frame the scene that this paper works with.

Hanging out is a deviant act in today's Western societies because it lacks clear goals. Still, it is tolerated at shopping malls when the

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¹ This research consists of three fieldwork phases. A pilot research was conducted in Helsinki, 2011. This was followed by a one-month fieldwork project in San Francisco (referred to in this paper) in 2012 and a similar project in Helsinki, 2013.

² The project in San Francisco was organized through a school with volunteer participants contacted via their art teacher. An initial meeting was arranged at the school, but the research was conducted separately from schoolwork. The participants filled in questionnaires and did mind mapping in groups to think about their hanging out. They then conducted photo-walks in the city on their free time. After this, I met each girl for a photo-talk (Pyry, 2015). At the end of the project, debriefing happened through mental mapping, and selected photographs were collected as a photo-exhibition by the girls.

young people involved are viewed as future customers. Anita Harris (2004: 164), among others, remarks that the terms ‘customer’ and ‘client’ are replacing ‘citizen’ in health care, education, housing and employment. When hanging out at the mall, girls are forced to define themselves through consuming. But, the picture is more complex. While hanging out, young middle class girls have a rare chance to be ‘off leash’ without direct adult supervision. I argue that this playful mode of *actively doing nothing* opens up space for meaningful being-in-the-world, because hanging out is often pleasantly purposeless, even boring, and thus allows for engagement and improvisation with the surroundings. By ‘dwelling with’, I refer to practical – seemingly trivial, yet often deeply affectual – playful involvements with the material world that can sometimes be accompanied with the inspiring experience of *enchantment*, a surprising wonder-at-the-world. I draw from Jane Bennett’s (2001, 2010) enchanted materialism and her discussion of ‘thing-power’ to acknowledge the liveliness that is internal to materiality.

To probe the playful involvement with the world that takes place while hanging out, I will start by thinking of ‘dwelling with’ as 1) a meaningful practical *engagement* with one’s surroundings (Ingold, 2000), followed by examining it as 2) *marking and claiming* the world as one’s own (Rose, 2012). These two views are complementary rather than contradictory and particularly the latter brings a touch of human intentionality to conceptualizing hanging out as ‘dwelling with’. That said, my theorization is informed by recent posthuman discussion on human–material relations (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Grosz, 2005; Joronen, 2012; Kirsch, 2012; Rautio, 2013; Whatmore, 2006), especially research within ‘non-representational geographies’ or ‘non-representational theory’ (NRT) (e.g. Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Horton and Kraftl, 2006; McCormack, 2003; Thrift, 2000, 2008; Woodyer, 2008; Wylie, 2009).

With a non-representational framework, I approach hanging out with a relational understanding of girls, things and the spatialities involved. I focus my attention to everyday affectual geographies that have to do with hanging out at a shopping mall. In line with NRT, I consider interaction with the world as habitual rather than ‘conscious’ and view life widely as humans/with/plus (see Cresswell, 2012). Understandings of agency then include an acknowledgment of the productive capacities of material: non-human entities also affect and create differences, and thus participate in making worlds (and human bodies). Agency is distributed in open-ended *assemblages* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), minglings of diverse elements, from which also hanging out emerges. These minglings are continual processes of gathering and distribution, from which materialities (a girl, a thought, make-up etc.) come into being in the event of hanging out. This understanding places human agency more at level with other forms of power: human intentionality is a special form of power, but it is often in competition with other forms, such as the power of different materials to affect human bodies. Granting agency to the non-human opens up imaginative ways to think about the flow of affects between the girls, things and the shopping mall, and makes it possible to produce alternative, anti-essentialist conceptualizations of embodiment (see Colls, 2012). Together with post-human feminist theorization, non-representational geography allows for new and inspiring ways of reflecting on questions power and politics in the taking-place of everyday practices, such as hanging out. When these matters are approached relationally, as entanglements of human and the non-human, they can no longer be viewed as individual capacities. Then profitable concepts like ‘girl power’, that heavily undermine the work of feminism, become unthinkable (see McRobbie, 2004).

Non-representational theorists have been accused for using complicated language and being detached from everyday life, and

for not paying serious attention to inequalities that have to do with gender, race, power and politics (e.g. Barnett, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; Salhanda, 2006; Thien, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Participatory research with teenage girls puts the theorization to its place: the concept of ‘dwelling with’ has evolved through my encounters with the participants and their hangout spaces during fieldwork. In order to conceptualize hanging out, I refer to vignettes that illustrate the experiences at the mall. The images and quotes are not to be read as evidence about the participants’ lives, but rather as indications of things that matter to the girls. During the fieldwork, photography and mental mapping were used as creative tools for ‘sensing and thinking with’, not as means of gathering data (Pyyry, 2015). The emphasis was on experimentation and re-thinking the ordinary. By working towards understanding the complex affective relations that have to do with hanging out, I aim to avoid the pitfall of ‘treating emotion as the outward expressive representation of some inner subjective entity’ (McCormack, 2003: 494).

I focus my discussion to the context of shopping mall, because in the era of ‘security’, many teenage girls spend their limited free time in consumption spaces that are considered safe by their parents (e.g. Koskela, 2000). As the quote at the beginning suggests, home is often a place where girls are subject to direct control by their parents and they attempt to negotiate space for themselves by hanging out in the city. They do this within the limitations that frame their everyday life. Katz (2006) refers to ‘terror talk’ that restricts particularly girls’ mobility in public and cuts down spaces for exploring (the ‘self’ and the world) for today’s ‘bubble-wrap generation’ (Malone, 2007). Consequently, hanging out has been studied from the perspectives of 1) urban (consumption) spaces and young people’s identities (e.g. Thomas, 2005; McCulloch et al., 2006), 2) the social function of spending time with peers and carving out space for it in the adult dominated world (e.g. Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2013; Lieberg, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000), and 3) politics and the openness of public space (e.g. Cele, 2013; Kallio and Häkli, 2011; Tani, 2015; Pyyry, 2014). Looking at hanging out from the dwelling perspective offers a new frame for thinking about what happens with these spaces that matter to many young people.

I will start the discussion by probing the affective relations that have to do with hanging out at commercial spaces. This discussion draws attention to the importance of everyday events, things and environments. I then show how forming meaningful engagements through movement and play, occasionally accompanied with the startling experience of *enchantment*, can make ‘dwelling with’ possible at a shopping mall. After that I approach hanging out as something that can be understood as marking and claiming places as one’s own. Finally, I conclude the paper by reflecting on the importance of ‘actively doing nothing’ and having space for it within Western public life.

2. The mingling of girls, things and consumption spaces: affective atmospheres in hanging out

‘Me and my friends, we go crazy there, like, we spend an hour or something in there...and you smell this stuff, it smells amazing in there. We love it! ... It’s just so much fun!’

In the quote a girl talks about hanging out at a store in a shopping mall. Her words suggest that hanging out, friends, this place and the things in there (lotions, soaps, candles etc.) are somehow important to her. As Horton (2010) notes, young people rarely talk about their lives by reflecting on *meanings*. Rather, they focus on how things *feel* and hence, draw attention to what *matters* to them.

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