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Self-portrait in the photo booth: self-representation in the selfie era, a Photo-based Educational Research Project

JOSÉ MARÍA MESÍAS-LEMA  and GUILLERMO CALVIÑO-SANTOS 

This visual essay is the result of an inquiry that analyses the selfie with students in the art teacher training programme in the Faculty of Education. These students are familiar with the selfie in a recreational context, in which the result and the aesthetics of the immediate prevail, overlooking elements of the photographic act. The visual experimentation triggered by the limitations of this strongly standardised and automated process is a challenge for young people. The results show a great capacity for visual reflection and denote a deep critical sense. The aim of this artistic research is to slow down the act of self-portraiture and to make it a more conscious process. The methodology of this Photo-based Educational Research is based on transforming the classroom into an artistic laboratory. For this purpose, a visual, experimental and theoretical research proposal is designed. The empirical part involves a photographic project that establishes the use of the photo booth as a technical condition. The theoretical dimension consist of the study of contemporary artistic references that consider the self-portrait and the selfie as a central theme.

INTRODUCTION

This Photography-Based Educational Research Project is the result of our artistic and pedagogical practice as teacher trainers for Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education at the University of A Coruna (UdC) in Spain. The object of study is the self-portrait in a context of art education training. Participating students are encouraged to test their ability to translate a trivial and domestic photographic act into an artistic setting, thereby learning to value the potential of photography as a manifestation of critical thinking.

First, a multidisciplinary review of the concept of selfie is made, mentioning authors with different approaches. Thus, there are researchers who evaluate the effects of overexposure in the development of personality, while others are interested in the selfie as a cultural artefact and its implications in the misrepresentation of social minorities. Next, the self-portrait and the selfie are approached from the field of photography as an artistic discipline, consistent with our educational research framework. We cite contemporary authors who were selected for their commitment to the inquiry of identity through photography. We also comment on the theoretical framework defined by Joan Fontcuberta on the selfie, an author noted both for his artistic practice and for his texts on the ontology of the image.

Subsequently, the proposal for the development of a self-portrait in a photo booth is described, which ultimately aims to train students in the development of a visual discourse that is as informed as possible. All this entails training people to be critical of the visual culture consumed through social networks. Selfies show us where we are, what we are doing and the mood we seem to be in, all in an instant. As James Franco (2013) says ‘selfies are avatars: Mini-Me’s that we send out to give others a sense of who we are’.

Methodology

The objective of this Photo-based Educational Research is to use the photo booth’s analogue photography to highlight the processes of construction of the self-portrait through the contemporary selfie. Students take self-portraits in the photo booth, adopting the performative role of artist. They create an image that gives a critical response to the selfie practice when it is

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the result of an automated, massive and repetitive action. From a participatory methodology with students, the artistic inquiry involves:

a visual method that uses photography in educational contexts with a threefold approach (descriptive, interpretative and artistic) and responds, first, to the potential of photography as a specific type of image with its own character, whose practice, reflection and production for research on educational activities is photographic. Secondly, it conceives photography from a twofold perspective: on the one hand, as a contemporary artistic practice within the educational, formative and research context; and, on the other hand, as a reflection of the students' artistic learning process. This implies thinking about photography from an introspective viewpoint that questions how we observe produce and interpret photographs, but also looks at the subject, asking how we are seen, how we see others and even recognising the other's gaze in teaching and learning processes. (Mesías-Lema and Ramon 2021, 10).

Unmasking selfies

The consolidation of the selfie as a regular photographic practice in the last decade updates the interest in self-portraits in different knowledge areas (anthropology, sociology, gender studies, visual culture, and communication). Studies from the field of psychology raise awareness of narcissistic¹ and exhibitionist excess, especially at key periods of personality development. In particular, the motivations and consequences of a practice that produces and distributes enormous quantities of self-portraits are considered. Balakrishnan and Griffiths (2018) design instruments to measure the degree of *selfitis*,² based on a scale that includes six factors: environmental enhancement, social competition, attention seeking, mood modification, self-confidence, and social conformity. Meanwhile, Albury (2015), analyses the ambiguous content of many selfies shared in social networks, especially those on the edge of *sexting*, revealing a significant gap between youth and adult interpretation. These studies aim to identify risks in young people's behaviour, but they communicate a limited, partial and pathologized version of the phenomenon.

Social researchers have shown a growing interest in the study of these images because of their pervasiveness and the unique characteristics that make them bearers of revealing data derived from its nature as a situated and collaborative practice (Weilenmann and Hillman 2019; Warfield, Cambre, and Abidin 2016). Other authors study the tensions of a phenomenon that involves 'wider socio-cultural, political practices that need critically accounting

for' (Gomez Cruz and Thornham 2015, 2). The selfie can be considered as a deulezian *assemblage* involving a complex web of technological elements, spaces, bodies and networks (Hess 2015). This approach goes beyond the constraints of a narcissistic analysis to focus on the relationship between the device, the body and the relational diversity offered by social networks. As a cultural artefact and social practice, the selfie opens the field to reflection on 'factors such as age, race, gender, sexuality, class, power, access, language, faith, nation, and history' (Senft and Baym 2015, 1589). For this reason, the debate around these types of images 'reflects contemporary social norms and anxieties, particularly relating to the behavior of young women' (Burns 2015, 1716). It is no coincidence that the harshest criticisms in social network comments focus on selfies where women or individuals from minority groups are represented. At this point, it is necessary to emphasise that although the discourses of self-affirmation, through images shared in social networks, are conditioned by the characteristics of these media, there is always room for diverse practices. Thus, the visual dialogue enabled by selfies can lead to discourses that transmit the dominant hetero-patriarchal stereotypes as well as manifestations of political activism, specifically those coming from LGBTQ groups (Duguay 2016). In this sense, instead of rejecting narcissism as something negative, it could be considered a trait with strong political and transformative potential (Goldberg 2017).

From an educational point of view, we share the idea exposed by Senft and Baym (2015, 1600) suggesting that 'if we hope to have any serious understanding of what the selfie says, to whom, and why, cultural literacy is not just a nice idea; it's an ethical prerequisite'. This attention towards the selfie by the academic community suggests that its study is unavoidable in teacher training programmes.

Self-portrait in contemporary art

For its part, contemporary art, in its role as an agitator of thought, has been collecting proposals that analyse this phenomenon. Authors as different as Gavin Turk, Arno Raffael Minkkinen, Tracy Moffat, Yasumasa Morimura, Trish Morrissey, Gillian Wearing, Huan Zhang, Anna Fox, Nan Goldin, Sophie Calle, Claude Cahun, Ana Mendieta, John Coplands, Esther Ferrer, Elina Brotherus, David Hilliard, Duane Michals, Pierre et Gilles, Francesca Woodman, Ai Weiwei, Richard Avedon, Mark Laita, Pierre Gonnord, Thomas Ruff, Rineke Dijsktra (to cite some of the most relevant ones analysed in the course of our teaching) have placed their artistic practices on the conceptual limits of self-portraiture. Around the idea of self-portrait, autobiography or selfie, an important exhibition have been presented in Spain in recent years that

have led to a captivating catalogue, *Yo, me, mí, contigo* (Vicente 2015). This reasoned catalogue offers a broad perspective of the artistic panorama of the last decades. The thematic variety encompasses the work of those who use photography as an interpretation of individual identity (Elina Brotherus), others for whom it is important to unveil the ideological context and the power of fiction through staging (Sophie Calle, Guy Ben-Ner), those interested in the historical construction of identity from a gender perspective (Claude Cahun), of those who turn to the crude materiality of the body (Ana Mendieta, John Coplans) or those who reflect on the active role of the spectator and the confrontation of his or her gaze with that of the artist (Esther Ferrer). The students' works reflect in many cases the inspirational influence of these artists.

From a theoretical perspective, the photographer, teacher and essayist Joan Fontcuberta (2016) theorises about the selfie as a photographic genre with its own identity. According to this author, there are three elements that constitute the ontology of the phenomenon: the documentary impulse, rhetorization and post-photography.

The documentary impulse suggests a primary response action, a reaction to life through the camera, with the ultimate goal of saving the moment from oblivion. This accessible and brief act of shooting the camera (facilitated by mobile phone portability) is repeated so often that it has become natural. However, the act of photographing is contaminated by codes that are viralised and unconsciously inoculated, manifesting themselves clearly in visual stereotypes.

Rhetorization is related to the transformative intervention of the scene by the photographer. Staged photography identifies the photographer as an artist who does not limit himself to the role of witness but creates (or recreates) the scene he wants to record. This manipulation clearly situates the work in the realm of fiction, but in the case of the selfies, the strong aestheticization manifested through artificial poses, the selection of exotic locations and the post-production of images through filters (vignetting, saturation ...), as well as the inclination to massively share the images on social networks, make up the identity pattern of this photographic genre.

Post-photography is expressed as a physical separation of the eye and the viewfinder of the camera. In early selfies, the characteristic gesture involved extending the arm holding the camera and rotating the hand 180° to aim at the shooter. This kinaesthetic connotation affects both the aesthetics and the content of the image, that is, it has semiotic,

but also somatic and sensory consequences (Frosh 2015). However, it should also be noted that in the broad sense of the concept of a selfie, there is room for a diversity of gestures. Thus, the arm has often been replaced by the selfie stick, the cable release, the timer, or even the finger of a collaborator. In addition, mobile phones and some cameras have inward lenses, which make shooting a selfie more controllable. These variants generate somewhat different images because they change the distance between the image plane and the subject plane, but essentially maintain the idea of building a staged self-portrait with a high dose of control over the result.

Beyond these three ontological elements, the social component should be added as an independent category. It is not only about recording memories or affirm an identity but also of sharing and interacting with others (Soerjoatmodjo and Laksmi 2016). In other words, it may also be a matter of rethinking identity through the eyes (likes and/or comments) of others. Hence, it can be said that 'the Selfie happens at the crossroads between performance, narcissism, social tick, an intrinsic desire for self-projection and a possibly irrational quest for authenticity in the contemporary photographic image' (Donnachie 2015, 1). This feature paves the way for artists like Franco and Eva Mattes (*The Others*, Riccardo Uncut), Natalie Bookchin (*Mass Ornament*, *Testament*), Intimidad Romero (*Stolen Facebook's 'Friends'*) and others, to explore the tensions and vulnerabilities that occur around concepts such as intimacy/extimacy or online/offline contexts (Baigorri-Ballarín 2019).

From an educational viewpoint, the analysis of the conventions that identify contemporary self-portraits has great potential for transformation. Moreover, it enables the vindication of photography as a medium capable of appealing to deep layers of human consciousness. The proposal described below attempts to link photographic practice with the underlying concepts at play in the planning, execution and distribution of a self-portrait. The novelty of this approach lies in the fact that conscious visual thinking is triggered through a strategy of substituting the cell phone for the photo booth. Students, familiar with the accessibility of the cell phone and its possibilities of immediate creation and distribution, feel challenged by a medium that requires a slow ritual and careful planning while at the same time allowing them to connect with the history of the medium. The results obtained, both through the images and the written reflection, indicate that the participants now recognise

photography as a rich and complex means of expression and reveal a more mature and responsible ability to analyse images, both in their role as creators and as readers.

Proposal: self-portrait in the photo booth

This proposal is inspired by a workshop by photographer and teacher Mariano Zuzunaga, held in the 1990s. The photo booth had its rise in the first half of the 20th century, and its arrival in the public space of the main American cities was around 1920 (Freund 1974). It is a small photo studio designed for the client to simply sit down, pay the fee, look at the lens, activate the button that starts the session and finally wait for the order to be delivered in the box located outside the booth. It is interesting to note, as pointed out by Peraica (2017), that this system of integral self-service transfers all control to a single individual who holds a power that in the case of a portrait is usually distributed: subject/object/curator/audience. In fact, this artefact is the predecessor of the customer's emancipation and the democratisation of the studio portrait phenomenon and, in a certain way, sets the psychological foundations of the selfie: the possibility of producing one's own image without the intervention of a third party. On the other hand, the small studio has a sliding curtain that allows the user to unwind in privacy. This space, away from prying eyes, allows a freer development of what we could call, the ritual of the pose. This fact has been explored by Abigail Davis in her art installation *Instant Exposure*. Davis stands inside the booth staging a performance that can be followed by the audience outside through a monitor. Thus, for each pose, the spectator has access to the movement of the body on the curtain, the video image of the performance and the photograph obtained after photo processing.

We understand teaching as a creative process and the classroom as an artistic research laboratory in teacher training. 'A classroom is a place for interaction, experimentation and research' (Mesías-Lema 2017, 397). In this case we foster a personal research that involves a personal empirical methodology in four phases: 1) Analyse the most common selfies on social networks; 2) Rethink the selfie based on selected authors, essays and contemporary photographic works; 3) Make a self-portrait in a photo booth; 4) Reflect on the process and the images made.

The analysis of selfies found on social networks enables us to examine in detail the photographic composition, poses, gestures, locations, filters, etc. and the role that these elements play in the creation of the discourse. Thus, for example, it is possible to see how gestures (victory sign with fingers, tilted head, pursed lips), locations (beach, entertainment venues, tourist sites, home), actions (sunbathing, reading a book, dancing), companies (couples, friends, family, popular characters), clothing ('fashionable' clothes) become visual clichés. These images are, as a whole, cultural artefacts that speak of an era and its most widespread rites and customs. At the same time, they inform the behaviour of individuals as to how they want to be perceived by others, sharing an image of themselves that functions as a mask that shows and hides at the same time. On the one hand, it shows the profile that generates social acceptance (and likes) and on the other, it hides elements that the person prefers to keep private. From this perspective, the reading of the images is revealing of a visual and symbolic identity (Eiriz 2021).

RESULTS

The results obtained show:

- (1) **The influence of artistic references enriches the visual culture and opens the range of expressive possibilities.** The search for artistic references by the students as a personal research process opens up new avenues of creative exploration. It also connects with their artistic processes: the inspirational dialogue with other authors, whether real or metaphorical, and the subsequent more or less distant response to the model. For example, Nerea V. explains her sources of inspiration:

'My self-portrait was inspired by another one by Gustave Goubert, called *Lee Désespéré*, (He who despairs). This painting shows a young man expressing impatience and despair. (...)
Although Gustave Goubert's self-portrait was made in 1845, I think it can represent the situation of many people today. I changed the position of the hands because I represent the head as the world in which we live and the hands as the life of each of the people depicted'.

The influence of the artistic references is evident in numerous results (Figures 1–9).



FIGURE 1. Ana Chao Selfportrait | My grip on life is rather loose!, 1992–1993 by Gillian Wearing.

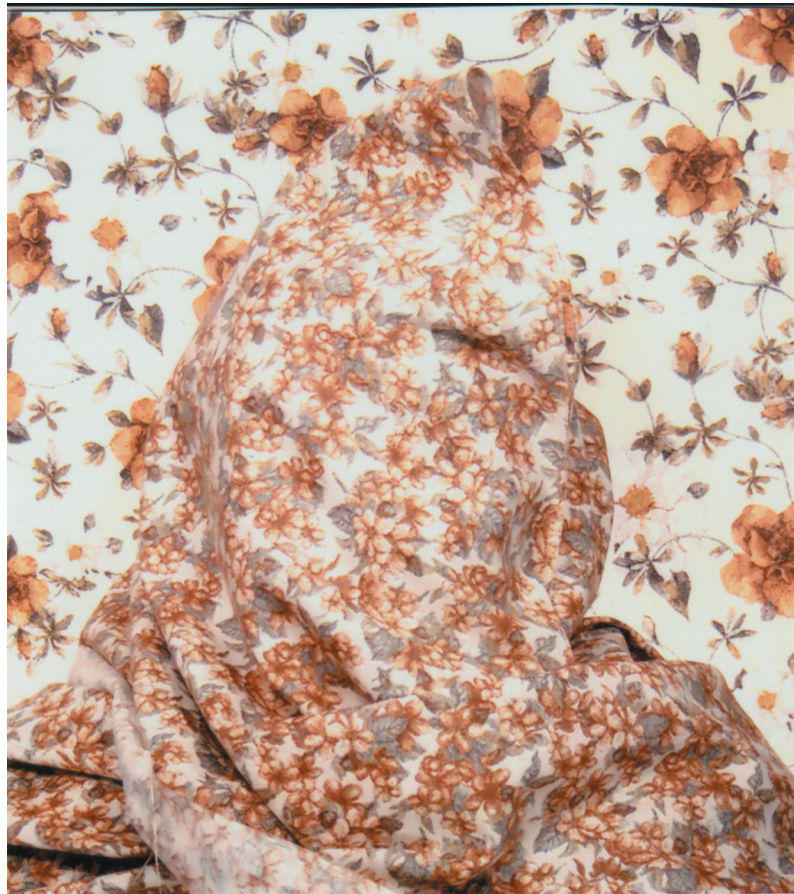


FIGURE 2. Anais Buyo self-portrait | Decorative Figures #03 by Verónica Vicente.



FIGURE 3. Carmen Boo self-portrait | Untitled (Glass on Face) by Ana Mendieta.



FIGURE 4. Cynthia Liñares self-portrait | Inhabited Painting 1976 by Helena Almeida.

(2) The photo booth imposes rigid conditions that force students to look for creative solutions in order to obtain personal images.

As for the process of creating the self-portrait, the photo booth is a challenge aimed at stimulating visual experimentation. This is how Laura C., a student, describes it: 'The execution process [...] has been quite complex for me, both while finding ideas and while carrying them out, since it is a very limited physical environment with rigid characteristics that require good planning and an inclination towards experimentation'.

From a pedagogical point of view, a technical context so restricted, enables a focused effort on the creative possibilities stemming from the limitations as well as an awareness of the basic elements that are part of the visual message: the pose, the background, the colour, the attitude ... Moreover, returning to the analogical, allows us to substitute a spontaneous and instantaneous act for another that imposes a delay between taking the

photograph and obtaining the result. It is not just a matter of pressing the trigger and immediate sharing on social networks, but the composition, together with the framing, the external elements and the lighting typical of a small room, forces the student to question his/her image projected towards others. The ritual inside the booth and the inherent delay in photo processing imposes a planning and preparation that forces a visual thought. Zeltia R. says: 'In the booth, we don't have the same number of attempts as when we use a camera or mobile phone, so in order to take a different photo we must plan in advance what we want to reflect and the elements we want to use'.

(3) Self-portraits can serve as a support for aesthetic experimentation but also for a vindictive and political message.

As for the content of the images, the pupils valued very positively the potential of the self-portrait for the **construction of a visual message**, which in many cases is related to current issues of interest to them:



FIGURE 5. Carla Alvarez self-portrait | Birthmark 1994 by Shirin Neshat.

‘I want to show what we, as women, experience in society on many occasions, the two sides of the coin, so to speak. We are judged by whether we are well dressed, well made up and always perfect, and when we are not it seems that we abandon ourselves and don’t care about ourselves, but ... why?’ (Ana V.)

The results obtained are surprising considering the limited opportunities for training students in the technique, construction and history of the photographic image. These are young people in the last two years of their studies in Faculty of Education (over 20 years old) who have consented to the publication of the images for academic purposes. In many cases students chose to build the scene through aesthetic formalisms but without ever losing the awareness of a critical message developed from the elements that are in play within a selfie. Mask and performance then become the protagonists of aesthetics and narrative, manifesting a will to show and hide layers of identity. Among the variety of strategies followed, we find self-portraits that play with the metaphor of the filter (Figures 3 and 4); the

sequence (Figure 6); the questioning of the optical nature of the medium (Figures 8–10); the photograph within the photograph (Figures 11 – 18); the social criticism the total or partial concealment of the face the stereotyping of femininity (Figures 19–21); the representation of identity, either by objects (Figures 5 and 22); colours (Figures 23–25); the autobiographical narrative (Figure 26).

As a result, the students feel the authorship in the construction of a visual discourse more vividly, instilling in them the idea that the selfies that they spread in social networks are a cultural artefact with multiple edges and therefore have socio-political connotations, something that is often overlooked

(4) Students face the challenge with trepidation but ultimately appreciate having their imagination and research skills challenged.

Although in general terms the proposal generates many doubts and uncertainties, the participants appreciate the challenge it represents, not only on a technical level but, above all, on an intellectual and emotional level. María José says: ‘Today I am a fuller person thanks to the introspection necessary to develop [the project], the same introspection that helped me attempt to make the most of a [personal] situation that was difficult to begin with’.

(5) The self-portrait allows for a profound reflection about one’s own identity.

We can see how in part of the self-portraits an interpretation of individual identity is proposed, demonstrating that it is assumed that the photographic image contributes decisively to shaping it. For example, Ana F. comments: ‘Sometimes I also live with that armour and that helmet and I don’t let people know me as I really am, so most of the time people know me as I am in this picture, trying to take off that helmet’. Likewise, Aroa M. says: ‘The photo booth has been a pioneer when it comes to reconstructing a “self” in freedom. This is where the photo booth precedes the photographic self-portrait, better known as “selfie” (...)’.

(6) Photography is identified as a means of inquiry for reality.

Some of the students reflect on the documentary impulse and the role of photography as a means of



FIGURE 6. Nuria Dios self-portrait | Photobooth self-portrait ca. 1963 a by Andy Warhol.

inquiry into reality. The camera acts as an instrument that encourages the scrutinising gaze. Alba B comments: 'I learned to stop and observe the reality around me in order to see it differently and to observe aspects that until now were hidden to me'.

At the same time, it is understood that the reality seen through the photographic device is not a simple record but rather a construction of a message that always implies a certain degree of interpretation, especially when the subject of the photograph is a person: '(...) the mirror theory, which says that we often see in others what we actually carry inside ourselves and, therefore, the judgements we make towards other people are related to what we think of ourselves. (...) I want to highlight the importance of not believing everything we see and the importance of not judging the first thing we see' (Aida V.).

(7) It allows you to connect with analogue photography

One of the most intriguing results of the project involves the fact that some participants became curious about the analogue process of photography and began experimenting with cameras that work with photographic film: 'The camera that appears in the photograph is an analogue camera that belonged to my grandparents, and in the summer I took it, put a film in it and since then I have been taking photos of the places I visited, friends, etc.' (Aroa M.)

(8) It is applicable to early educational levels.

Considering that the students are being trained as teachers for initial educational levels, many of them emphasise that their learning enables them to take on projects related to photography involving younger

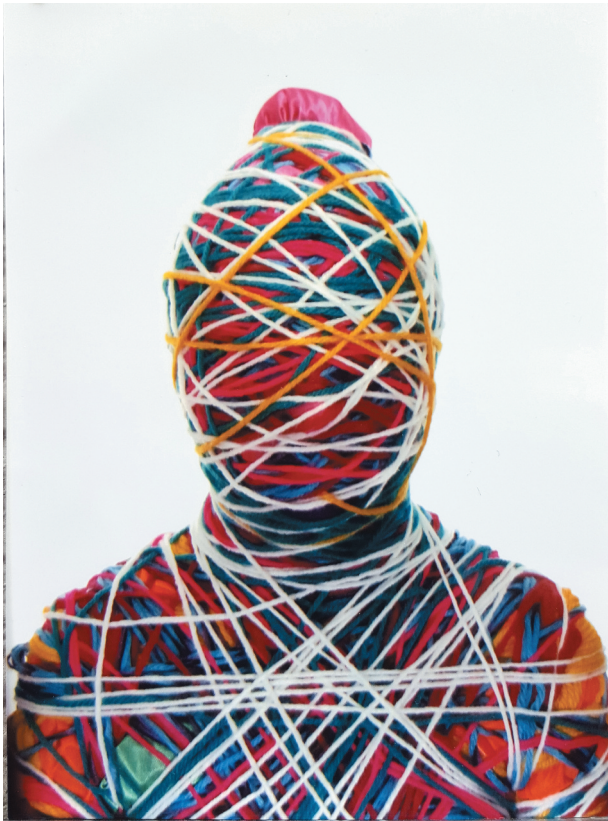


FIGURE 7. Raquel Castelos self-portrait | Christo, Central Park, New York, 1981 by Annie Leibovitz.

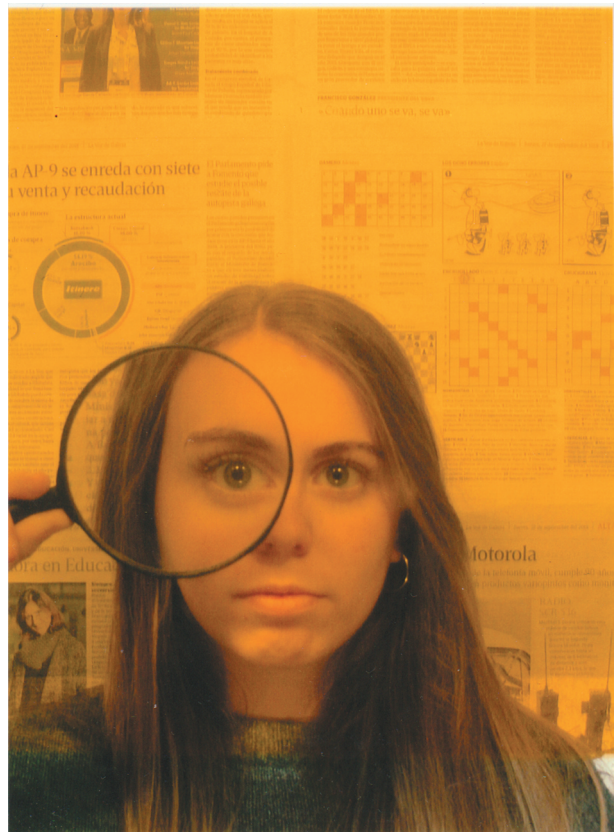


FIGURE 9. Noemí Penedo self-portrait | Salvador Dalí, 1946 by Phillippe Halsman.



FIGURE 8. Raquel Mourin self-portrait | Heisenberg's Magic Mirror of Uncertainty 1998 by Duane Michals.



FIGURE 10. Anais González self-portrait.



FIGURE 11. María Domínguez self-portrait.



FIGURE 13. Ana Laura Recarey self-portrait.



FIGURE 12. Celia González self-portrait.



FIGURE 14. Marta Lodeiro self-portrait.



FIGURE 15. Raquel Rodríguez self-portrait.



FIGURE 17. Irene Lage self-portrait.



FIGURE 16. Tamara Morado self-portrait.

children. “This project is applicable to other educational levels because of the experimentation with photography, including elements of great interest for these ages such as costumes, make-up ... Moreover, it is an enriching opportunity both to



FIGURE 18. Nuria Pereira self-portrait.



FIGURE 19. Carla Pernas self-portrait.



FIGURE 21. Isabel Vilariño self-portrait.



FIGURE 20. Vanesa Fernández self-portrait.



FIGURE 22. Angela Novo self-portrait.



FIGURE 23. María Fuertes self-portrait.



FIGURE 24. John Brendo Diniz self-portrait.

expand their experience and knowledge of different aspects of photography (light, colour, filters, shadows, decoration, framing, etc.) and to discover the potential of photography to transmit different meanings, sensations, protests or reflections. In addition to all this, there is the added advantage of



FIGURE 25. Judith Sánchez self-portrait.

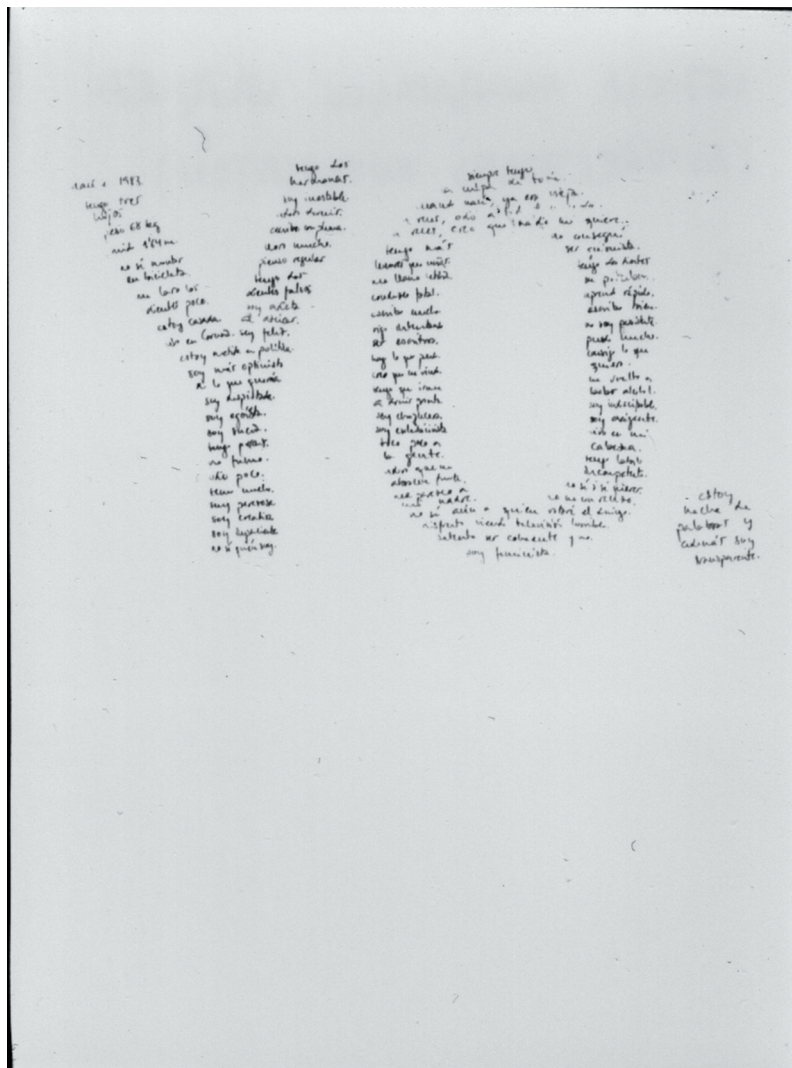


FIGURE 26. Leticia Barbadillo self-portrait.

recovering an ancient element and its role in the history of photography'. (Laura C.)

CONCLUSION

From the result of the images created by the students and their reflections on their participation in this artistic research, it can be concluded that through photo booth photography can reveal the creation mechanisms of a visual text and the potential it has as an instrument for the critical analysis of the selfie. In this process, the students developed the necessary competences to evaluate the selfie as a cultural artefact from an artistic perspective. In this way, they are able to assess the influence of 'culture' on their own tastes and preferences. This study enables reflection on the type of images coexisting with them on a daily basis, initiating a profound transformation of beliefs in relation to photography and its expressive possibilities in the environment.

Moreover, these young people can now use the camera on their mobile phones with greater awareness and know that they have an instrument in their hands to vindicate their presence and their ideas. Detecting the foundations and possible contradictions and paradoxes of the self-portrait has been an artistic and educational challenge. With all this, we intend to question the public and private use of selfies on the web, fleeing from the idea of the selfie as an ephemeral identity built without depth.

Finally, this research demonstrates the validity of photography as an instrument to question reality and its contexts, including educational, cultural and historical contexts. Learning is evidenced in the self-portraits and confirmed through reflection, in both cases, demonstrating an analytical attitude and a mature perspective on the use of photography.

NOTES

- [1] In this article the concept of narcissism is identified with the so-called vulnerable narcissism type, which is characterised by hypersensitivity to the opinions of others, an intense desire for approval, and defensiveness, as well as entitlement, grandiose fantasies, and the need for admiration (Dickinson and Pincus 2003).
- [2] The term *Selfitis*, as used in the aforementioned article is attributed to the American Psychiatric Association, which defines it as ‘the obsessive-compulsive desire to take photos of one’s self and post them on social media as a way to make up for the lack of self-esteem and to fill a gap in intimacy’. However, we are not aware of the APA mentioning *Selfitis* in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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