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Obraz(y) seba samého ako súčasť vizuálneho zobrazenia života

Self-image(s) as a part of the visual representation of life

Daniela Valachová, Miroslava Repiská, Dominika Weissová

Abstract

The formation of self-image is part of being human. Human communication with the surrounding environment can occur in various ways. A specific kind of communication is the visual self-image. It is a specific kind of communication characteristic for visual arts and also for a group of young adult participants. This paper, on the theoretical and research levels, focuses on the presentation of young adults' self-image in their visual representations. The aim of the research was to explore self-image through portraiture in photography. The research was conducted not only through an analysis of visual data, i.e. photographs, but also through thematic analysis of the authentic reports given by the participants. The results highlight the self-image of young adults for whom the arts provide a medium for self-expression.

Keywords: Self-image. Self-expression. Self-reflection. Conceptual art. Visual representation. Photography.

Preface

Through self-expression, a person presents themselves in different ways using various media. One communicates, expresses oneself, experiences emotions and holds particular attitudes. We can express ourselves in different ways. A distinctive mode of communication through art is communicating by action.

Communicating self-expression through action

Communication is a part of behaviour and includes three basic modes, verbal, non-verbal and action communication (Kollárik, 2008):

- Verbal communication - communication mediated by linguistic signs and meanings attached to them. We understand the process of communication as the exchange of information in a broad sense, involving the exchange of knowledge, attitudes, opinions, ideas, moods and feelings.
- Non-verbal communication - including body signals, facial and visual signals, spatial and territorial communication, communication through objects, communication through touch, extra-linguistic expressions and silence, temporal communication.

- Communication by action - this type of communication is characterised by action and its execution.

Humans are not just passive thinkers and doers of the bidding of others. Humans act in accordance with their own values and intentions. These are the intentions of human behaviour, which include motives, desires or beliefs that are based on a man's personality and take a certain shape and form based on the foundations of human individuality, peculiarities, individual and specific interests, attitudes, values or beliefs that are inherent in a person. However, our behaviour, the way we present and express ourselves, its triggers, manifestations or consequences, are not only about us, but also about others who form our environment and part of our lives (Kollárik, 2008).

Self-expression through visual media

Most human experiences are distinctive in their individual focus because they take place in the autonomous realm of the individual's psyche, while experiences of art are, understandably, co-determined by external influences, these are, for example, the reactions of 'neighbours' to the same stimulus in collective perception. However, the experience of interacting with a work of art enhances the psychic potencies of each individual and, as it were, heightens the consciousness of one's own individuality (Cigánek, 1972). In addition to perceiving art visually, we focus on experiencing it, thinking about why I am a part of art, what influence it has on my individuality. The incomprehensibility of art, that may accompany us through life, can be broken by striving for understanding and by creation. By getting involved in the process of art making, we gain an insider's view of art, because "*creation requires us to have a greater intensity of perception, we gain a deeper satisfaction*" (Fila, 1991, p. 63).

Photography as a medium does not have to be understood only in the sense of an image capture, it is not just a pure transfer of reality onto the image. Photography can capture the inner feelings and beliefs of the photographer, it conveys opinions and attitudes (Repiská, 2023). Photography, as a full-fledged way of artistic language, has become not only a means of documentation in art, but has also become a means for expression of the artist, a medium in its own right. Photography captures moments that are ephemeral, impossible to see in everyday life. A photographer is able to convey his perception of the world, of himself, in one shot. The interest in depicting one's own image dates back to approximately the 15th century and persists to this day. Recent studies (Giannachi, 2023) suggest that the self-portrait is not only about self-presentation but also about anticipation of reception. It is about the construction of a space-time that is turned towards both the past (implied by the artist's presence) and the future (implied by the viewer's presence), so that the depiction of the self-portrait pushes the boundaries between artist and viewer. The agent in action perceives, interprets and seeks to understand the body within the environment that he or she creates and adapts through his or her actions (Kováčová, 2020). Self-expression through the photographic medium

is close and typical of young adults in their artistic self-expression (Valachová, 2021). The inspiration for this research project came from the work of the internationally renowned contemporary Czech artist Jiří Kovanda. His work is being received and reflected internationally, especially through his artistic actions, installations and interventions (Jeřábková, 2010).

Figure 1: Jiří Kovanda, *Untitled*, 19.11.1976, Prague, Václavské náměstí



Source: Jeřábková (2010)

The artistic action *Untitled*, but similarly his other actions in the public space, are powerful despite their "simplicity". Morganová (Jeřábková, 2010) describes this as the most iconic artistic action of Czech action art. It is one of the few actions of Czech body art that takes place directly on the street. This action is created for the unprepared spectator - the casual passer-by. Kovanda's photography often has a minimalist impression, and he also uses his body as a rather minimalistic material. Kovanda is present as if in passing, but at the same time he addresses several layers of reality.

These artistic actions look like visual "anecdotes", they may appear random, but nevertheless they are not here completely by accident (Budak, 2016). In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jiří Kovanda says that this was a slightly different position than his colleagues' work, it was something they were not involved in, yet it was important to him (Havránek, 2006). The very fact that these events took place in a public space in the city centre was extraordinary for the time. Also, the venue, Václavské náměstí, is a symbolic place with many historical connotations and meanings. The *Untitled* action was not just an attack on passers-by, an attempt to bridge the anonymity of the city and to break down the barrier that everyone carries around them. As Kovanda himself explained, the reason for the action was mainly an attempt to break through his own timidity that confined him to loneliness, even though there were a large number of people around him (Morganová, Seidl, 2013).

The research project

The primary aim of the research was to create a series of self-portraits of the participants, created as a reaction to the original photographs by Jiří Kovanda. Our research focused on exploring the idea of the self represented by:

- the physical form (the creation of one's own visual image),
- the visual form (the plan and realisation of one's own image) through photography.

As a research method, we used thematic analysis as a qualitative method of inquiry within art and artistic expressions (Urban, 2020).

A group of young adult participants were the respondents of the research. The group consisted of 35 undergraduate students.

In this paper, we describe the research probe taken from a broader empirical research and we outline the process of evaluating the thematic analysis research data. We have drawn directly from the authentic accounts and experiences of the participants. We focused on three categories of thematic analysis in the interpretation:

- the idea of self-expression,
- social reaction,
- the author's own experience.

Theme of the project: Self-image in the outdoors

For the self-image project we chose one reference point, the photographs of Jiří Kovanda. In order to come as close as possible technically and visually to the original photographs, we took advantage of the circumstances and nature of the photographs. The form of the photographs remains identical in both material and visual aspects (black and white photography). The thought analysis develops according to the personal preferences of the participants.

Participants were instructed to create a self-image that captures the participant in an environment and in an action/position/location that portrays them as a person with a specific characteristic that distinguishes them from others (Kováčová, 2023). These photographs were to be taken outdoors, in an environment where there are random passersby who are not informed about the photography session beforehand.

The task was to involve a photographer who would be given an assignment. It was necessary to explain to the photographer exactly what to take a picture of and how to take this picture. It was also important to describe what was meant to be in the picture. To instruct the photographer so that the shot would be according to the author's ideas. It was necessary to create several photographs and select one as the final one, which the student would give a title to - a descriptive caption (gallery caption), that conveys the message of the photograph.

One of the aims of the activity was to observe people reacting to the action in some way during the activity. To observe their reactions - interactions (communication - questions) or ignorance. In the initial discussion (before the

event) we discussed a time that is acceptable and requires minimal effort to remain in the moment. Together we set a goal to stay in one pose for at least 10 seconds.

Due to the active involvement of the participant in the photography taking process, the basic requirements for the photographs have emerged:

- the performer will be placed centrally or according to the principle of the golden ratio - thus the author will be clearly recognizable in the photograph, not only by his/her action but also by his/her placement.
- the performer will be clearly distinguished from the surroundings by his/her movement/position/gesture, the audience will not know what is being planned and that a photo is being taken,
- the photographer must be hidden from passers-by,
- the photographer and the author who instructs him/her must keep in mind that the photograph must have a broader scope - not only the subject, but also the people in the surroundings and the surrounding environment, so that it is clear from the photograph where the subject is being photographed and in what context.

In addition to the photographs, the outcome of the project was also a reflection where the authors of the photographs described the feelings and reactions they experienced. By its nature and assignment, the self-portrait photograph became an artistic action in a public space. The participants experienced the whole process, from planning, to choosing the subject, to selecting the photographs that were taken during the photo shoot. The participants chose one final photograph that represented them the most. They chose a photo in color and in black and white and gave it a title.

Parcial results of the research

The subject of the self-portrait: It was immediately clear to the author what idea she was using. *"What comes to mind when you see pillows? Rest, relaxation, sleep, comfort. I'm a big sleeper. I like sleep, but I hate mornings. For years, I have been setting at least 20 alarms for every morning. I just can't wake up. Every 3-5 minutes my alarm goes off and I turn it off each time, and I can do this for good 30 minutes or more."* The author wanted to say that every morning when the city wakes up, people run away to work and school, she is still *"asleep and enjoying sweet dreams"*. When she saw a park bench she immediately had to lie down and was curious how people would react to it, take pictures of it, and show it to her.

Figure 2: Sleep



Source: authors' archive (D. Z.)

Societal reaction: The author has chosen to realise her project noon, around 12.15 pm. It is the time when there is a lot of people in the park. During the artistic action, people were either sitting on other benches, lying on the grass, or walking along the paths. Most people who saw the author from a distance usually turned around to avoid her and took a different route. If they finally decided to go in the direction where the author was, they walked on the complete opposite side of the pavement to be as far away as possible, and only few people looked at her. Only one elderly lady walked quite close by her, but she didn't look at her. The author lay there for more than 5 minutes repeatedly, as people did not always walk by and she had to choose situations when it was appropriate to lie down and when she could sit. Later, there was a situation where a mom was walking with her young son who ran up to the author. The mother immediately reacted and called him over. Another pensioner passing by walked slowly because he had a walking stick and pointed it at the author and looked horrified. The author assumed: "*...that people would stare at me in that position but look surprised, and most of the people walked by without looking. It was quite embarrassing for me, and for a few minutes I was encouraging myself to lie down on the bench.*"

The experience, the mood: The author stated "*it was nothing pleasant*", but after the realization, which lasted a total of 30 minutes, this unpleasant feeling turned into "*an experience and great fun, as we enjoyed the performance itself.*" (both her and the photographer) "*If I closed my eyes and stopped perceiving the world around me, suddenly it was much more pleasant and I could even remain lying still for quite a long time.*"

Fig. 3: The cycle of life: love, food, education



Source: authors' archive (T. H.)

Interpretation of the photograph The cycle of life: love, food, education

The subject of the self-portrait: According to the author, the theme of the self-portrait was a challenge, *"a way of discovering myself"*. The author described this task as difficult, even though it seemed easy at first. She describes how she came up with the idea of how she wanted to work on her photograph: *"So I was sitting with myself and I was thinking about life, and that's when it came to me, I'm going to take a picture of the circle of life."*

Although the author generalized the theme, she chose her own three apt words that she personified. By the circle of life, she imagined love, food, and education. These are themes that resonate in her life and influence her personality. She explained her need to portray not only herself but also these elements in the form of artefacts: *„ One constantly needs attention, emotional support, hope in something/someone. Food as our pillar of support, we need it to exist/be, as the most important thing. And of course education, we educate ourselves everywhere, constantly, soaking up knowledge from all around us, wherever our feet take us."* And it was the topic of education, which is a theme that is present in her life and takes up a lot of her time, that she decided to process into a photographic image. She learns everywhere, in different places, meaning even in places where people are doing things and thinking about things that are completely different from hers. That's why she laid out her school notebook at the bus stop.

Societal reaction: The author chose a place where there are lots of people, where there are lots of eyes, feet and hands: *„But I chose a place so ordinary that it was extraordinary. Without thinking too much about the possible circumstances, I laid down on the ground in the middle of the street, spreading*

out my elements like a book, roses, and snacks." Here she sits, motionless and bent over her school notebook, reading her notes. Other people move around, shifting throughout the day to different places that give them different functions. The reactions she described were varied, as "*people all around didn't understand what I was feeling*", or why she was lying on the ground. Passerby were looking, they would stop, they would speak, they would pretend not to see her, but at the same time they were looking at her with or without wonder. The author perceived this as a great rush, a rush of the day, when she realized: "*The way YOU stand out in the midst of all those people speaks volumes about your uniqueness! It speaks volumes about your life, your choices, your priorities, etc.*"

The experience, the mood, the atmosphere: In the process of taking the photographs, the author had time to reflect, and during the final evaluation she expressed that she found the whole task enjoyable and that she felt good: "*I realized that it was all meaningful, if only because I realized an important thing. That thing is that not everyone in life will understand you, not everyone will speak to you and look at you kindly, but you will never lose faith in yourself. Just like I did when I was lying there proudly, on that ground, and I felt really good.*"

Sub-conclusions of the thematic analysis

Based on the responses of the authors of the photographs, it was clear that planning and coming up with the theme was easy and effortless for them. The most difficult part of taking the photographs was their own experiences and thoughts about how they were perceived by those around them. The challenging part for them was perceiving how they are being watched and misunderstood, they stand out from the crowd and this makes them insecure. Just as it was Jiří Kovanda's attempt to break through his own timidity, our interpretation of the process of making the photographs brought exactly the same theme. Fearfulness, insecurities, vague feelings accompanied the participants who had to change their behaviour for 10 seconds in front of strangers. Only they knew what they were doing and why. But the moment of incomprehension turned into pleasant feelings in the time of those 10 seconds, because the participants realized that they were doing this action for themselves and the attitude and behaviour of others was not important. The final reflections of the authors seem to be positive despite the atmosphere of their surroundings.

Conclusion

This research probe has helped us to create the basis for our broader empirical research. We are aware that the photographs could undergo further analysis and interpretation, which we will include in our next broader empirical research.

Affiliation

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prof. PaedDr. Daniela Valachová, PhD.

Department of Arts and Culture, Division of Art Education,
Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava
Račianska 59, 813 34 Bratislava, Slovakia
valachova@fedu.uniba.sk

Mgr. Miroslava Repiská, PhD.

Department of Arts and Culture, Division of Art Education,
Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava
Račianska 59, 813 34 Bratislava, Slovakia
repiska@fedu.uniba.sk

Mgr. Dominika Weissová

Department of Arts and Culture, Division of Art Education,
Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava
Račianska 59, 813 34 Bratislava, Slovakia
weissova@fedu.uniba.sk