

Who Are These Women?

Conceptualising Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) through Exploring the Use of Participatory Photography within Networked Space



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent University for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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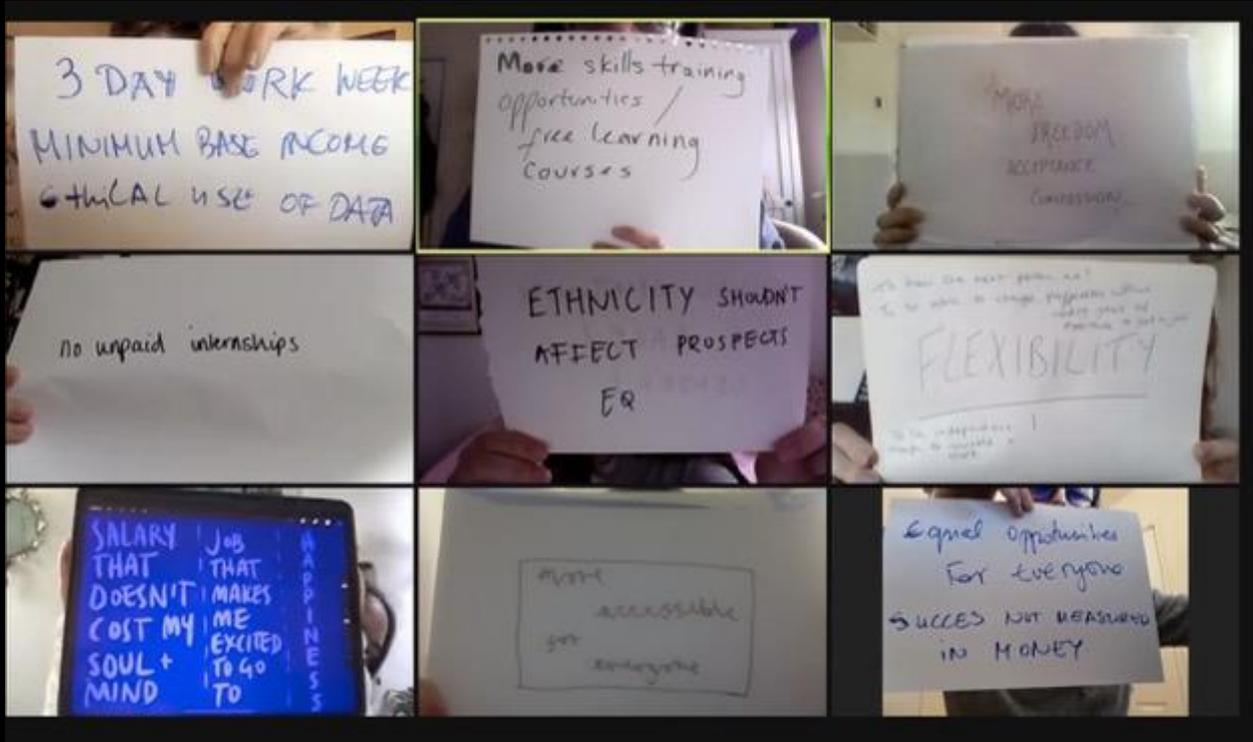


Figure 1 A screenshot from the Who Are These Women? Online Workshops, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

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Abstract

Who Are These Women? is a practice-based research project that aims to critically examine the potential intersections of participatory photography and the networked image within networked spaces. I conceptualise critical visual literacy (CVL) within socially engaged photography as a reflective model that underpins this project's methodology and use of participatory photography, and I refer to it as Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL). PCVL utilises the reciprocal structure as a metaphor to develop eight key areas for consideration: creativity, context, self-representation, group work, critical reflection, analysis, outputs, exhibitions, and transformation. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I organised a series of online workshops aimed at young women who, at the time, were not in full-time education or employment. This online initiative expanded my thinking and provided insights into the use of technology and remote engagement to an extent beyond what I had initially envisioned. Throughout the workshops, we explored the young women's experiences and interactions with networked images and social media, their connection to employment and precarity, and their role in shaping their identities. Key findings from the work created by participants include the pressures to perform identities in neoliberal environments, the commodification of 'femininity' through images, and the importance of critical reflection when creating photographic self-representations. The insights from their work on these issues were explored, shared and presented through an online exhibition and an art book. One of the key critical insights of the project, based on the final outputs, was that photography can be both the problem and potentially the solution to questions of representation. Through reflection on the practice, I also found that while smartphone cameras, networked spaces, and technology enabled remote participation, they also impacted privacy and engagement while presenting ethical challenges. The research suggests that digital communication technologies, including smartphones, are likely to become the preferred tools for participatory photography projects; however, the risks involved, as well as the distribution of power between humans and technology, need further critical exploration. Through addressing inherent ethical concerns, the research found that transparency and reflection are imperative in conducting a participatory photography project and that power dynamics related to language, remuneration, authorship, and representation should also be carefully considered. The research suggests that these considerations are unique to every context, and utilising PCVL can be a productive critical model for asking pertinent questions when engaging with participatory photography, which requires an open and reflective mindset for each individual project. The research contributes to artistic research and the wider fields of feminist media studies, networked images and photography and, ultimately, to the practice of participatory photography as a whole.

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And finally, I want to thank myself for actually seeing this through.

Introduction

I feel perplexed as I find myself in a dome-like space with translucent exterior walls. The whole area is illuminated evenly as if I am a miniature inside a diffused ball-shaped lightbox. The space is full of heaps of fluffy soil or something resembling brown, rich-coloured fertiliser or ballast. It feels strange but also soft and pleasant to the touch. I find myself digging through the dense but light matter or engaging in what feels more like diving or swimming. I know exactly what I am looking for: participatory photography. I remember finding and holding it, but I can't recall the specific material form it had taken. I vaguely recall it resembling something...grey, but then it would disappear. I continue searching by diving and swimming. The fluffy soil is both nourishing and obscuring within its opaqueness. I keep looking... but I can't see. There are too many mounts with too much ground to cover. I am lost and frustrated. I seem almost to find it, but then it slips away. At points, I forget what I was looking for in the first place. I woke up and proceeded to write this chapter.

On the surface, this dream simply manifests my worries concerning writing this thesis. It represents common anxieties around writing a PhD thesis. Concerns that mostly have to do with trying to find direction in a sea of publications, condensing interests and pinning down all the key terms, in my case, within the context of multiple disciplines and contradictory definitions.

Upon deeper analysis of my dream, latent and symbolic meanings begin to emerge. It is full of contradictions related to seeing, knowing, subjectivity and my positionality. It is symbolic of the uncertainty and constant search for answers. It can also be understood as a reflection of my ongoing inadequacy and the considerable resistance I experienced in articulating and appropriately conveying and making sense of a process that is to be experienced rather than articulated. A kind of 'knowing' through practice that is both affective and embodied, based on human interactions and connections, also serving to challenge the ways we understand knowledge in the attempt to pin things down rather than view them as fluid.

These concerns are also not uncommon for arts-based interdisciplinary practitioners and scholars who do not fit neatly into one area of study. My research spans several of these areas – humanities, visual culture, visual sociology, ethnography and anthropology, photography, art practice, psychology and therapeutic photography, social sciences and participatory action

research. A key challenge I encountered was the continuous negotiation between conflicting epistemic values within different disciplines and often even within the same field, usually ranging from opposing ends of the spectrum - from positivist approaches favoured by the social sciences to relativist theories within the arts and visual culture. It took some time for me to establish a critical direction and to position myself in a way that aligned with my work as an artist and photographer, which has been informed by my years of collaborative photography practice. Therefore, while informed by multiple areas of study, this thesis is positioned within the domain of artistic research.

Background

The last 15 years of my practice as a photographer have been defined by organising and facilitating projects of a social and collaborative nature, both as an artist and within the charitable sector. The most relevant experience is my role as founder of the community interest company HumanCamera CIC¹. Through my practice, I have organised and delivered a significant number of projects, which provided me with considerable expertise in participatory photography² and socially engaged practice.

The most relevant project, which was also a precursor to this PhD research, is the project organised through HumanCamera and funded by Futures³ - *Don't Look Back, You Aren't Going That Way*⁴. The project was conducted over a year and consisted of several design, recruitment, delivery, analysis, and dissemination phases. It involved a team of facilitators and three groups of 14 participants affected by ill mental health and not in full-time education or employment. Participants were given cameras and would attend weekly workshops over several months. Each participant produced a body of photographic work, including a series of photographs accompanied by a written narrative which expressed a personal account of their struggle with ill mental health and the potential barriers they experienced in relation to employment, which were published in a photo book.

Don't Look Back, You Aren't Going That Way, and my experiences shaped by the practice of participatory photography have served as essential expertise and ongoing inspiration and

¹ HumanCamera CIC (Community Interest Company) an organisation that operated on not-for-profit basis www.HumanCamera.org

² Participatory photography is the term I will be referring to throughout the thesis for the main approach that will be used for this research and will be elaborated on in Chapter 1

³ Futures is a Nottingham, UK based employability support organisation

⁴ You can find information about the project on the www.HumanCamera.org website and copies of the published photography book are available for sale at Waterstones in Nottingham

motivation for this doctoral research. The outcomes, positive feedback, and overall process left me with the sustained desire to make sense of these experiences and critically explore the possibilities and limitations of participatory photography within the ever-changing landscape of digital photography and networked cultures.

Positionality

The more this PhD research progressed, the more I distanced myself from any inspiration or aspects that could have been aligned with participatory action research and, more specifically, positivist quantitative approaches within the social sciences. I was able to reflect on my ethical concerns through my previous experiences and often obvious discomfort with some of the evaluation practices and claims within the HumanCamera project - *Don't look back, you are not going this way*. My main concerns were mainly related to the considerable pressure and subsequent claims made by funders on the social change aspects of the project, which is not uncommon within socially engaged practices. These targets included quantitative data that displayed progression to employment or education as a result of the project, which can be used as part of communication strategies and justification for future funding. My concerns were not due to any lack of belief in the methodology or whether social change is possible through participatory photography, but rather due to the realisation that there is so much uncertainty and potential for contradiction, lack of transparency and, therefore, ethical misconduct. Change is fluid and never objective, and in isolation. There are many influencing factors, including group dynamics, facilitation, changing personal circumstances of everyone involved and the way power is positioned. Untangling these elements from the image-making process seems implausible. My position as a researcher is thereby shaped by my previous experiences within practice as a photographer and artist, which ultimately informed my thinking and set up for this practice-based PhD and the search for a critical understanding that does not serve a single agenda.

Furthermore, as a female researcher working with a group of young women, it was necessary and appropriate to apply a poststructuralist and feminist lens to this research. Feminist literature, contemporary photographic theory and visual culture are also connected in their pursuit of questioning the notion of objectivity and truth. "...feminism and visual culture – are, in this way, driven by political concerns and focus primarily on cultural forms as informing subjective experience." (Jones 2003, p.1). The notion of seeing is also implicated in many ways in relation to subjectivity, knowledge, visual culture, photography and truth; as the age-old adage goes, 'seeing is believing'. Observation through visibility has been the primary sense many humans have relied on to construct meaning in the world and create objective empirical

truths of how the universe operates. In her essay, “Situated Knowledges” (1988), Donna Haraway begins to deconstruct the scientific principle of disembodied objectivity, and when considering her ideas, seeing begins to no longer equate to believing. Feminist discourses challenge the notion of objectivity and the hegemony of patriarchal norms, which are embedded in systemic inequalities which affect women's perceptions of their identities and access to opportunities. By acknowledging and reflecting on the subjective and situated knowledges generated through this research, poststructuralist and feminist critical concerns became important factors in my decision-making for the set-up, outputs, and overall positionality within this project. In doing so, the project challenges dominant narratives of gender representation and photography, ensuring that both participant and researcher perspectives are incorporated into the project outcomes and used to shape the proposed methodological approaches within this research.

Why Photography?

My ongoing interest in understanding the position of photography within socially engaged art and collaborative photography practices has been consistent in my research. Having studied and worked in the field of photography for most of my adult life, I have witnessed photography transition from the analogue to the digital and the changes this brought within visual culture. Photography has been under continuous technical transformation⁵ since its inception. Technological advancements accelerated considerably in the 21st century, in line with the exponential growth of digital technology and the internet. The advent of the camera phone and the rise of networked cultures set in motion photography's transition to the networked image⁶. The networked image as discussed by Sluis and Rubinstein “...is data, that is: visual information to be analysed and remapped to new contexts via algorithms.” (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008, p.21). The shift in photography from the analogue to the digital introduced a significant change in photographic theory and practice and the understanding of visual culture.

The visually dominated culture we now find ourselves in is saturated by networked images defined by computational data, algorithms and networked human interactions. The meaning of a photograph is no longer governed purely by its representational value produced by light and shaped by vision, but by metadata and algorithms which determine its visibility, position and meaning (Sluis 2020). Photography's historical relationship to truth has long been questioned

⁵ “Photography has been under constant technical transformation and there is an ongoing need for new photographic ontologies which include the cultural impact of photographic practices on how images are viewed, produced and understood” (Sluis 2022).

⁶ Networked Images is a term which will be central throughout this thesis and is intended to mean digital images that circulate within networked spaces and often serve as data points.

within photographic discourse. It has always mediated perspectives and aligned with dominant ideologies (Tagg 1988). Fred Ritchin (2009) critically examines photography's indexical claim in his book *After Photography*, highlighting how digital technologies significantly disrupt the medium's traditional ties to material reality. In 2022, towards the end of this research, an even greater transformation started with the popularisation of text-to-image AI-generated images, which will further break apart photography's relationship to representation and the real. This research does not directly explore AI-generated photos, however, these images represent the complete breakdown, in the traditional historical understanding, of photography as truth, which makes the following question more pertinent than ever: How do images shape, represent and inform our understanding of ourselves and the world around us?

Furthermore, images shared within networked spaces⁷ like social media have become a way for people to express themselves, tell their own stories and shape their understanding of their identities and the way they are projected and perceived. Therefore, understanding how this occurs and how meaning and knowledge are constructed through photographs is more relevant than ever. Networked images are also used to create meaning in our lives through their production and consumption, not only through what they represent, but through serving as data points within the networked economy. It is essential to understand to what end networked images shape our knowledge systems and understanding of the world, and what agenda they serve by potentially reinforcing existing biases and stereotypes.

The socially constructed patriarchal reality that we live in disadvantages and stereotypes certain groups of people based on gender, race, class, age and ability, a process in which photographic representation has played a significant role. As feminist scholars such as bell hooks (hooks 2015a) and Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1975) have demonstrated, women are particularly affected by the way images often portray and affirm gender norms, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities. Photographic production has been complicit in supporting dominant ideologies and shaping how we view ourselves and the world around us. Questions of representation and power dynamics have been central to photographic practices. The relationships between the one being looked at and the one doing the looking have been a critical point of debate within photographic discourse and the critique on documentary photography. Socially engaged and collaborative photographic practices have been at the forefront in the attempts that seek to address these questions of representation and power by

⁷ The intended use of the terms networked spaces is meant to encompass live sessions via video conferencing tools, remote image-sharing platforms, social media and screen-based messaging platforms based in online environments which I elaborate on in Chapter 4.

proposing alternative, more ethical and critical modes of representation through photography. Some of these may include collaborative forms of production, using captions that provide further context, visual literacy⁸ and self-representation⁹. However, critical questions on how these collaborative photographic practices intersect with digital technology like camera phones and the use of digital images and networks for their dissemination need further exploration, which this research aims to address.

Research Aims

Throughout my practice, I have been interested in understanding the role of visual literacy as a means of production of meaning within participatory photography, which has also been a key motivation for this research. My enthusiasm for how images are interpreted and created has also been fuelled by the ubiquity of photography and the prevalence of self-representation within contemporary visual culture. This led me to my primary aim for this research, which is to critically examine how participatory photography can be applied within networked spaces and through the use of networked images.

Women are affected by higher levels of unemployment and hidden labour and are frequently targeted by images of consumer products, which often inadvertently perpetuate gender inequality, as noted by scholars such as Gill (Gill 2007) and McRobbie (McRobbie 2009). Through the use of images and self-representation on social media, women are able to either challenge or reinforce these gender stereotypes. Therefore, my second aim for this research is to conduct a critical investigation into the use of images within networked spaces and the application of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) from the perspective of a group of young women not in full-time education or employment.

1. A critical examination of critical visual literacy within participatory photography. How can Participatory Critical Visual Literacy be applied within networked spaces and through the use of digital technologies?
2. How do the production and consumption of networked images and self-representation shape, represent and inform individual identity through the

⁸ Visual Literacy is an important term as part of this research which will be expanded on in Chapter 2

⁹ Self-representation is used in reference to people creating their own images to represent themselves which will be expanded on in Chapter 2.

perspective of a group of young women not in full-time education or employment?

Who Are These Women? - Methodology and Practice

Participatory photography and what I conceptualise as Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL)¹⁰, specifically applied within the context of participatory and collaborative photography, underpin the methodology of this research. The term critical visual literacy has been utilised in education, media literacy, and art analysis, but lacks a specific definition. Common threads in the few attempts to frame the term include the idea that critical visual literacy builds upon the concept of critical pedagogy and applies it to visual materials. It also encourages the interpretation of images in relation to power structures and within their cultural, historical, and political contexts (Newfield 2011; Chung 2013; Kim and Serrano 2017; Olson 2024). Visual literacy, the production of images and their interpretation are central to participatory photography. Building on this, I reconceptualise and expand critical visual literacy (CVL), shifting the focus from image interpretation and skill acquisition to the reflexive dimension of image production as praxis and situating it within the framework of socially engaged photography. In this research, CVL positions the act of photographing and reflexive interpretation as forms of situated knowledge production and engagement. I refer to this reflective model within this thesis as Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) to distinguish my use of the term from the existing use of CVL. This conceptualisation puts in the foreground reflective dialogue, critical discussion, and the relational and creative aspects of photographic practice. PCVL not only serve as a reflective model for this research but also as the guiding methodology, which has informed every aspect of this project and constitutes a significant part of the contribution to knowledge of this research.

The PhD research timeline was set up to include a pilot study that explicitly tests some of my ideas related to the use of camera phones and online technologies with young people within a collaborative photography framework (Appendix B). I then intended to proceed with my main participatory photography workshops with a group of young women not in full-time education or employment. However, it is important to state that due to COVID-19, the main workshops were delivered entirely remotely within the framework of networked spaces, utilising video conferencing tools, which significantly accelerated my thinking around the use of technology and introduced remote engagement dimensions to the research, the extend of which I had not

¹⁰ Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) is a reflective model for the practice of this research which underpins its methodological approach and will often be referred to as PCVL throughout the thesis with a detailed account in Chapter 2.

originally anticipated. Consequently, the project was also set up to push the possibilities and limitations of these collaborations within an online environment entirely mediated by a screen and to explore the intersection of participatory photography and the networked image within networked spaces with the group of young women. The workshops included image production and critical discussions, resulting in a body of work produced by each participant. The project culminated with the online exhibition *Who Are These Women?* which can be viewed online [here](#).



Figure 2 *Who Are These Women?* Online Exhibition, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232215> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The research inherently also questions the production of knowledge through the process and the practice. Knowledge discourses, as defined by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002), refer to the site by which knowledge is constituted and its relationship with social practices, and the power relations and subjectivities which exist within this knowledge. Discourses are not just about thinking and ways of producing meaning; they can constitute the emotional life of their subjects, their conscious and unconscious mind and their bodies. Practice-based artistic enquiry is in its infancy and has a disputed level of rigour dependent on the geographic and institutional context, as Robin Nelson collates in Part II of *Practice as Research in The Arts* (2013). Within discourse aiming to valorise praxis, I find myself treading unknown pathways filled with academic uncertainty within artistic research, where the constant grappling with where knowledge resides and how it resides within an embodied and process-oriented practice that includes being, doing, object and articulation. Therefore, examining the process as practice as a way to generate and embody knowledge also becomes

relevant to this research. It will contribute to discussions related to artistic research, embodied knowledge, and the understanding of new ways of knowing through process and practice, as well as how the artistic outputs communicate the findings in their own right¹¹.

Thesis Chapter Structure and Contribution

The socially engaged use of images extends beyond photographers and artists. Images have long been utilised by researchers in visual sociology and related fields such as visual anthropology and ethnography, as well as in the not-for-profit sector primarily focused on activism. Despite this, each practitioner engaging with photography comes from their own disciplinary epistemological understanding. These differences gave rise to a range of similar and often overlapping practices based on participant-generated images that can appear under different names depending on who is involved and from what background. I adopted participatory photography for this research as the most fitting term, which is able to dwell in all of these domains of interest and expertise. It is essential to understand how each of these practices overlap and inform the process of collaboration as well as the role of photography within them. In **Chapter 1**, I provide an overview of these practices and their theoretical underpinnings, in order to position *Who Are These Women?* within them.

Visual literacy as a concept is underexplored within participatory photography practice and its critical appraisal. It is a contested term with no set definition, occupying a diverse range of meanings and different epistemological spaces within visual culture, education, art, and visual communication, which will be reviewed in Chapter 2. Understanding the role and function of the image and its analysis within participatory photography is more pertinent than ever under the new context of the networked image. Images within these projects can often be either undermined and viewed merely as data or assumed to be a stable source of information, which can lack a deeper understanding of the problematic nature of photographic meaning. Therefore, I would argue that critical visual literacy, an essential process, sits alongside image production as a central component for the successful delivery, analysis and meaningful output production of a participatory photography project.

¹¹ As Candy outlines: "Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes which may include artefacts such as images, music, designs, models, digital media or other outcomes such as performances and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to those outcomes. A practice-based PhD is distinguishable from a conventional PhD because creative outcomes from the research process may be included in the submission for examination and the claim for an original contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work." (Candy 2006, p.3).

Influenced by my understanding of the importance of visual literacy and underpinned by critical literacy¹² and the work of Paulo Freire (1970), in the methodological **Chapter 2**, I conceptualise Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) as reflective model that will underline the methodology and application of participatory photography within *Who Are These Women?*. PCVL emphasises the dialogic framework of the process in which the group critically discusses, analyses and interprets selected images, both their own and those of others. Rooted in practice-based inquiry, I explore the emergence of criticality through dialogue, unconscious bias, positionality, and creative choices throughout the photographic process and interpretation. I contend that these are crucial factors in image production within socially engaged photography and essential components of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy. This work offers a framework that broadens CVL beyond image analysis to also foster reflexivity and self-awareness through group reflection in the image-making process.

PCVL will utilise the reciprocal structure as a representation of the process, which includes eight key tenets for consideration: creativity, context, self-representation, critical reflection, group work, analysis, outputs and transformation. PCVL is also derived from the existing collaborative photography practices and theoretical underpinnings within the arts, research and social activism, informed by my practical expertise and through the deliberate critical enquiry of this research. Participatory Critical Visual Literacy is intended to be a way of considering, reflecting and thinking about the design and process of participatory photography projects rather than being viewed as specific or prescriptive. Each participatory project has its own particular context and aims, therefore, a prescriptive approach would be to the detriment of its success.

A rise in postfeminist representations perpetuates a new image of an 'empowered' woman who has attained complete emancipation from patriarchal norms. These representations of women have resulted in new kinds of 'youthful femininity' that can be identified in the postfeminist networked media aimed primarily at young women (Gill and Scharff 2013). Furthermore, under neoliberalism, image representations and re-enacted self-representations can be related to systems of profit-making where gendered identities, amongst others, intersect with socioeconomic status, covertly reinforcing oppressive systems of power. The

¹² Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach that enables individuals to reflect on the social construction of language as initially developed by Paulo Freire as a way to for empowering the oppressed and literacy was understood not merely reading words but "reading the world" (Freire 2005b)

young women who were part of the research engaged in PCVL to reflect on these postfeminist undercurrents in their image production, and they created photographs that challenged some of these postfeminist notions and representations. In **Chapter 3**, I contextualise and position the outcomes of the workshops and photographs produced by the seven women who participated in this research within a wider theoretical framework of feminism and the networked image. The themes that emerged through the work question identity within photography, the representation of women and precarity, as well as the commodification of the female body within networked spaces.

Understanding how participatory photography intersects with the networked image and how it can be applied under the new conditions of networked spaces has been significantly underexplored. In **Chapter 4**, I critically explore the use of digital technologies and networked sites, including smartphones, video conferencing tools, and a range of online sharing platforms, as a result of the research and project *Who Are These Women?*. I further reflect on questions of ethics, digital exclusion, authorship and remuneration, as well as how screen-based technologies mediate these interactions and group dynamics within networked spaces.

The research aims to contribute to questions related to the role of technology and the networked image within participatory photography in networked spaces, moving away from an entirely human-centred discourse to a posthuman perspective. Within this study, it is also critical to approach participatory photography and its underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics through poststructuralist and postmodern¹³ perspectives. This enables the research to contribute to the critical investigation of the ideas, inherent assumptions, and discourses associated with it. By presenting PCVL as a reflective model within participatory photography, this methodological inquiry within networked spaces also aims to contribute to the practice of participatory photography by offering a critical perspective that encompasses practical, ethical, and theoretical dimensions that can be useful for practitioners choosing to engage with it.

Furthermore, as a unique contribution to knowledge, the research presents the perspectives of the young women who were part of it by facilitating the creation of their visual narratives and

¹³ Postmodernity can be characterised by the rejection of grand narratives as proposed by Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) where he explores how knowledge is constructed and how power is distributed within it, as well as subjectivity and the influence and development of technology on these processes.

situated insights into their lived experiences and identities, utilising the PCVL methodology, as conceptualised by this research, within networked spaces. By amplifying these perspectives through the PCVL framework, this thesis contributes to feminist media studies, photographic representation and participatory photography as a methodology.

According to David Bate, photographic discourse is particularly full of contradictions and subjectivities:

Photography might be constructed and conceived as a network of discursive practices, interlinked with contradictions, inconsistencies, and overlapping unities such that to map the points at which these multiple contradictions are constituted becomes itself the objective of research work (Bate 2007, p.5)

My background in photography places questions related to photographic practice and the image at the centre of this research, which aims to contribute to visual culture and photographic discourses related to representation, ethics and the use of the networked image within networked spaces. It specifically aims to contribute, through the work and perspectives of the young women who took part in this research, to discussions on feminist media studies and questions related to self-representation through photography, the use of images within networked spaces and how these contribute to the understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Despite my efforts to articulate the process and to pin down concepts within this research, I still find myself negotiating the contradictions that occur within my reflective voice, my critical voice informed by theory, and that of my participants. These constant slippages of meaning and the omnipresence of contradictory concepts that cannot be fixed, consistently affirm my subjective positionality. From where I stand, the search for one objective truth would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack, only like in my dream, the needle neither exists nor can ever be seen, but it is present in an infinite range of subjective possibilities dependent on who, where, and how, that can never be separated from one another or the outcomes. The needle exists in multiple locations simultaneously and in none at all. I have often been left with more questions than answers, with which I will also undoubtedly leave you as my reader. Participatory Photography as a methodology is riddled with uncertainty because it requires relinquishing control and power. Where there is no control, there is a lack of certainty. However, the knowledge and value of this research can probably largely be located within this uncertainty. It does not ignore or try to paint over the cracks; it dives into them by providing

insights into the good, the bad and the grey related to undertaking participatory photography projects.

This research also questions the established hegemony of discursive knowledge versus that of practice within the discipline of photography, as well as the inherent contradictions within it. "When photography is conceived as an image that is set over and against the world—as a mirror, a window, a map, or an illustration—this understanding builds on the idea of reason as the fullest expression of truth and reality." (Rubinstein 2020, p.156). However, Rubenstein also concludes that "this self-evident truth of visibility casts a long shadow on photographic theory because it blocks the possibility of inquiring after everything that is invisible, latent and hidden" (Rubinstein 2014, p.1). There are no easy answers, and perhaps, in the end, the contradictions we are left with can end up being more truthful.

How to Navigate This Research and its Outputs

This research is made up of:

- The *Who Are These Women?* 3D and 2D online exhibition? and the resulting collaborative practice, which can be viewed here: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232215>
- The written thesis
- An artist's book of the visual work, which was printed with a limited run to share with the participants.

The written thesis positions, contextualises and provides a rationale and reflection for the practice, which was undertaken in collaboration with a group of young women. The writing consists of the intersection of my critical voice, my reflective voice and the work generated by the participants. The reflective writing incorporated within this research, within the thesis itself and as part of the appendices that accompany it was a way for me to think about the research and my position through writing. It can be viewed as a form of thinking practice in and of itself, as well as a bridge between the writing and the visual work produced. Therefore, the word count reflects the interdisciplinary nature of this research and can be positioned somewhere between the requirements of a practice-based PhD and that of a standard written thesis.

Furthermore, the practice and the production process are key components in understanding this research, which should be viewed as an integral part of it, through the knowledge they embody. Therefore, this research has been set up with the intention that the practice and its

visual outputs are fundamental to its understanding and should be explored alongside the written thesis. However, the order and ways of engaging with the different components are open to interpretation. There is flexibility in how one chooses to engage with the different materials, allowing for a non-linear approach to experiencing the research.

A Review of Participatory Photography and Socially Engaged Practice

The recollection of my dream at the start of the introduction was also a direct response to a quote from the book I was reading before going to sleep the night before, which continues the trend of uncertainty and contradiction. The opening quote in Chapter 3 of Grant Kester's book *The One and the Many* states: "I don't know the meaning of the word 'representation'. As hard as I try, I can't find any meaning to the word." by Santiago Sierra in an interview with Rosa Martinez (2011, p.155). This quote sums up some of the complexities related to questions of representation, which is a crucial theme underpinning participatory photography. In this chapter, I will explore how representation underpins many of the iterations of collaborative and participatory photography, its different starting points and how they inform each other. It will also provide various examples from practice and how practitioners used this approach within their practices.

Representation and Its Predicament

In his text, Kester uses predominantly examples from the medium of photography to explore issues of representation. The reference to photography highlights photography's unique struggle with representation, which can largely be attributed to the perceived relationship of the photograph with reality and the camera apparatus as equivocal to seeing. Within photographic discourse, this notion can be referred to as indexicality¹⁴ and can be perceived at its ontological core as the photograph standing in relation to a subject; a photograph is usually a photograph of something (Scruton 1981). This relationship with reality has defined photography as a medium and has been central to photographic theory.

Representation and reality, therefore, have been central themes in the exploration of photographic theory, and many have attempted to conceptualise this core characteristic. According to Roland Barthes in his seminal text *Camera Lucida*, the "noeme" (1981, p.77), which he describes as something that has been, differentiates photography from other

¹⁴ The index was first introduced as an idea by Peirce and he referred to it as a "pointing finger" (the Peirce Edition Project 1998, p.226) which is the sign pointing to an object. In photography this can often be understood as "...something to do with the general status and relation of photography to the world we live in, what we call "reality." (Bate 2019, p.85)

mediums and the impossibility of separating a photograph from its referent. Rosalind Krauss affirms this by saying: "The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object" (Krauss 1977, p.75). Andre Bazin links to other representational practices like Egyptian mummification: "[through representation] we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced" (1960, p.8) and representational arts to "having the last word in the argument of death" (1960, p.6) in this way attempting to stop the effect of time by means of representation. In contrast, Stuart Hall talks about the notion of cultural practices and, therefore, the production of images always involved in the translation process rather than authentically fixed (Hall and Maharaj 2001). In *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg rejects the image as a record of reality and explores the historical use of institutional images as an object of representation (Tagg 1988). Jean Baudrillard considers the possibility of the image preceding its actual representation – it neither reflects nor distorts a reality (1994, p.2). Attempts to conceptualise this representational aspect of photography have evolved from a realist perspective to photography standing in (and, in a way, shaping) reality rather than just representing it. However, regardless of the position, the relationship with reality distinguishes photography and its derivative mediums from other visual mediums.

The rise of the digital image at the start of the new millennium marked the beginning of photography's imminent death¹⁵ and the era of post-photography. The new computational image led to a turning point, which propelled the search for new photographic ontologies. This included the breakdown in photography's representational objectivities, giving rise to the most recent nonrepresentational theories of the networked image and the shift away from the more 'traditional' photographic theories (Rubinstein 2014; Ritchin 2009; Dewdney 2021; Rubinstein and Sluis 2013). Daniel Rubenstein explains this process as follows:

...the digital image cannot be understood without taking stock of the delicate workings of data because the image is an outcome of processes that are driven by algorithms rather than by aesthetic decision-making and therefore cannot be comprehended through the holy trinity of representation, the index and the punctum. (Rubinstein 2014, p.2)

¹⁵ The death of photography is closely related to the crisis of representation and photographs being understood as evidence or truth and the rise of digital photography also referred to post photography (Batchen 1994).

Efforts have been initiated to examine the shift of the photograph to its digital counterpart, which includes the impact of data and algorithms. However, there is a need to understand how the traditional and emerging theoretical paradigms of photography and the image can complement each other through the paradox of representation that the networked image creates. The meaning of the image has shifted from its representational aspects to its computational counterpart. However, from a human perspective, the representational is still what moves us. Lev Manovich asserts, "the digital image annihilates photography while solidifying, glorifying and immortalising the photographic" (1995, p.3). The images we see and when we see them are informed by algorithms and computational data. The representational is no longer considered only to affirm reality but is mediated by technology, screens, and algorithms.

Negotiating an understanding of the representational is particularly pertinent for any human-centred methodology, like participatory photography, where storytelling through photography and meaning-making fall under a social constructivist paradigm. However, these approaches operate under a new algorithmic and nonrepresentational understanding of the image under a different technological framework of the camera phone, the internet, the screen and social media. A critical examination of participatory photography operating under these new conditions of the networked image and networked cultures is important in understanding how, through practice, it can negotiate both the representational and the nonrepresentational theoretical frameworks and the paradox of the photographic condition that it thus creates. "On the one hand, the photographic image is simulated by a nonrepresentational code, and on the other, it continues to be read through the cultural code of representation." (Dewdney 2021, p.70). Building on Dewdney's proposition, it can be assumed that this paradox can become particularly conflicted when theory and practice collide within those different paradigms and within the framework of human-centred methodologies like participatory photography. Whilst theory, rightly so, continues to assert its nonrepresentational characteristics, photographic practice within the framework of participation, in equal measure, continues to lean almost entirely into its representational code of conduct.

Therefore, negotiating the workings of both these paradigms under the conditions of the networked image within participatory photography practice is important but has been significantly underexplored. It is also important to acknowledge that regardless of the ontological paradigm of the image one wants to belong to - in the camp of the traditional photographic theories or writing those off entirely and replacing them with new computational ones - representation, or its lack thereof, is as ever exigent within photographic theory. 'It is

representation rather than photography that needs critical attention, and the effort to separate the two is part of making the space to consider visual representation in its transmedial multimodal forms." (Dewdney 2021, p.23). Thus, focusing on the politics of representation, it is particularly important to examine how socially engaged practices and, more specifically, participatory photography is theoretically underpinned and often informed by issues of representation in the tradition of documentary photography, socially engaged arts and visual research and how they can transform to operate under these new networked conditions which I discuss further in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I will review the different practices of participatory photography and socially engaged art and how they have been informed by questions of representation and power within photography.

A Review of Participatory Photography within Research and Socially Engaged Arts

Representation and Participatory Photography

This undisputed belief in the visibility of the photograph has such a strong grasp on theory that it imperceptibly bonded together otherwise dissimilar and sometimes contradictory methodologies, preventing them from noticing that which is the most unexplained about photography: the precedence of looking itself.

(Rubinstein 2014, p.1)

Chapter 3 of Kester's book *The One and the Many* (2011) attempts to make sense of the function of photographs of poverty, where Kester uses examples of photographs of blindness by Jacob Riis¹⁶, which serve as a metaphor for some of the historical issues related to photographic representation of class, gender and race – in terms of the power dynamics played out between the one doing the looking and the one being looked at. Kester alludes to this by noting, "The rhetoric of seeing and being seen, of blindness and revelation, that is both literally and symbolically represented by the figure of the blind beggar was central to Riis's work." and continues to tell us that the person stands like someone who can't be entirely sure of his position in the world with "patient subordination" (2011, p.160). The act of seeing -or its lack thereof in this case - blindness can also serve as a symbol for the understanding of visibility

¹⁶ Jacob Riis worked in the second half of the 19th Century and is one of the first photographers in the US that used photography as a form of social change. He is famous for his project called *How the Other Half Lives* (Riis 1890).

and, therefore, knowledge, as well as the power discrepancies within these relationships: the inability of one to be able to see, therefore know.

The power dynamics and the politics of representation played out in this example are central to what participatory photography as a methodology stands for and ultimately seeks to subvert in its multiple uses and diverse points of entry. It might lack a set definition or step-by-step methodological pathway and can be described in different ways, with different names, by a diverse range of practitioners with opposing epistemic values. However, one key characteristic cuts across, or if not it should, all of its applications, and that is its collaborative nature in producing photographic images and, therefore, stories that aim to diminish power discrepancies within the relationship between the subject and the photographer. Participatory photography does this by proposing an alternative mode of representation through a form of self-representation, by enabling people who would typically be the mere subjects of the photographs or participants within the research to produce their own photographs and document their lives in order to tell their own stories, in their own way, on their own terms (Rose 2016; Pink 2013; Harper 2012).

The ethical dimensions of representation have been central to the critique of documentary photography in search of alternative modes of expression, which participatory photography is founded upon. An example of documentary critique, both in theory and in practice, includes the work of Martha Rosler, one of the critical voices in tackling the issue of representation and power within documentary photography. Her work, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (Figure 3), is a body of photographic work that incorporates words with images, also featuring no direct representation of people. In her work, she addresses the ineffective attempt of photographs and words in being able to represent the social reality of the Bowery in Manhattan, where each system of communication (words and images) seems to undermine the ability of the other to represent. Her writing on photography continues these conversations as it explores how realities are potentially manipulated for specific audiences through representation. Through this process, the knowledge that is produced intersects with established power dynamics of class, race and gender (Rosler 1981; Rosler 2004).



Image removed due to copyright

Figure 3 *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, 1974-75*, by Martha Rosler
<https://www.martharosler.net/the-bowery-in-two-inadequate-descriptive-systems> [Accessed 22 November 2023]

According to bell hooks, whose work focuses on locating hegemonic discourses as they manifest themselves in representation: "Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonisation of the mind" (1995, p.3). Furthermore, Jo Spence, a British photographer, writer, activist and an essential contributor to this discussion, in the 1970s talks about photographs not being neutral or unpolitical and builds an argument that there are hidden ideological messages that contribute to shaping values, affirming stereotypes and what we consider to be 'real or normal' (1995). Additionally, Abigail Solomon-Gaudeau (2017) also affirms in her writing that in postmodern photography, any representation is political, even the one that is innocent-looking and has ideological implications. Therefore, photography plays an essential role in shaping our understanding of the world by representing it based on the dominant narratives and ideologies present within contemporary culture.

Critiques of representation within documentary practices ultimately aim to find ethical ways of dealing with issues of objectivity, truth and evidence within photography rather than leading to the complete abandonment of representing the world. Martha Rosler discusses this in an interview with Robert Fichter and Paul Rutkovsky:

I've written about documentaries as a dead form. But without some reference to the real, there's no place of departure...To suggest that it can't be perfect is not to suggest that there is nothing to be aimed for, even if the strategies you end up with don't look too much like classical documentary. I still think the effort to represent the real or to represent something beyond complete interiority or complete surface is essential. I think it is the basis of all representation (Rutkovsky and Fichter 1998, p.10).

This critical examination predominantly focuses on creating a more ethical framework and practices that do not reinforce hegemonic stereotypes or undermine and put the people depicted in the photographs at risk. As Susan Sontag points out in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), photographs can be framed to fulfil a specific agenda or dominant narrative, which raises questions about authenticity and objectivity for photographs to be able to represent truth.

Ultimately, much of the criticism of photographic representation is focused on enabling a different kind of 'seeing' and an ethical engagement with photography. Martha Rosler's work and writing embody such a commitment, and her work also focuses on recognising it in the projects of others. Furthermore, bell hooks (2015b, p.173) discussed the notion of "counter-hegemonic" art, which means that the camera can become a tool for "counter-hegemonic" narratives of self-imagining and radical world-making by people who are usually reduced to stereotypes in representations produced by dominant cultures. Through her practice, Jo Spence draws attention to the political content of personal photography and the fictional aspects of documentary photography. Ariella Azoulay, in *The Civil Imagination*, offers "a new form of intervention" that assists "privileged citizens to identify and acknowledge their inherent flaw in citizenship" (Azoulay 2015, p.245). In this way, photography can be both the solution and also the problem of representation. As part of this discussion, participatory photography, thereby, ultimately also aims to propose a new form of engagement with photography through its various iterations and points of entry, which I will explore independently in more detail next, as well as look at how each iteration and application of the methodology is potentially informed by the others.

Participatory Photography as a Research Methodology

The process of observation and deliberate witness of human events is often associated with the field of ethnography. Observation can also be associated with the act of seeing and visuality and, subsequently, the desire to understand, 'capture' and 'fix in time' these encounters with people and culture. In this way, the act of observation is somewhat entangled with the process of seeing. The photograph and its derivative technologies can bear witness to these events, making possible, through documentation, a new form of representation and communication within sociology, ethnography, anthropology, and research as a whole.

Visual ethnography is a discipline where visual mediums, predominantly photography and video, become central to ethnographic research. Photographs have been used in anthropology and ethnography for a significantly long time. Initially, images were considered able to

objectively 'catalogue' and present the world, as seen in early accounts of photographs used within ethnographic studies. Visual ethnography is an attempt to understand culture by making it visible, as described by visual sociologist Douglas Harper (2012). An important example of this is the study of Balinese culture by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson from the early 20th century, which included one of the most extensive photography collections of 25 000 images on film. Despite this, the photographs were there to merely balance the "inherent bias of words" (Harper 2012, p.12) and were presented as a complete and objective representation of the culture they depicted. However, with the rise of poststructuralism and visual culture theories becoming embedded in academic disciplines, the critique of the photograph's ability to serve as evidence has significantly increased.

Visual research methods had to be reconsidered and established in ways that meaning was understood as multifaceted, ambiguous and complex. Furthermore, visual approaches grew exponentially at the beginning of the millennium. This can probably be attributed in part to the rise of visual cultures and, in part, to the advancement of technology and social media. An increasing number of practitioners from different disciplines, ranging from the arts to the sciences, started to be interested in using photographs as part of their research and practice. As a result, a range of different visual methodologies began to emerge. One of the most comprehensive attempts to describe and bring these methodologies together is Gillian Rose's book *Visual Methodologies* (2001), edited and re-edited multiple times since its first edition. In one of the latest iterations of the book (2016), she includes a new chapter on photovoice and participatory photography as methodologies, which evidences the increasing interest in the search for new and collaborative ways of observation and representation. The power discrepancies that play out in the relationship between researchers and their subjects pushed researchers and artists alike to collaborate with participants in various ways. Examples include researchers working to collaborate with individual participants and with focus groups of people (Pink 2013). When photographs are produced collaboratively, they reflect both the photographer's and the participant's intentions, representing the outcome of their discussions.

In the latter half of the 20th Century in the West, several methods that include participant-generated images started to emerge. Most of these approaches usually involve giving cameras to volunteering participants, who are then given photographic prompts. This process usually involves attendees representing a specific theme and aspects of their lived experience, thus becoming participants within the research. These approaches aimed to turn participants into co-researchers by addressing some of the power discrepancies where the same participants would have been mere subjects within the research process.

A systematic review of participant-generated image approaches used within research (Balomenou and Garrod 2016) identified a wide variety of names used to denote a similar methodological approach, suggesting a significant shift in the naming of the method over the years. The most frequently used term currently is 'photovoice', followed by 'autophotography' or 'visitor-employed photography', with the most recent and consistently used one being 'participatory photography'. There is a much smaller sample of other names¹⁷ used in reference to what can effectively be considered the same approach, which are listed in the same study. The article concludes that "there are no hard-and-fast distinctions to be made between the different "brands" that have emerged" (Balomenou and Garrod 2016, p.349) with photo-elicitation being the only approach which can be significantly distinguished and primarily focuses on inserting a photograph into a research interview. A critical characteristic of all these approaches is the group discussions, reflections and, therefore, critical interpretations and analysis of the photographs (as discussed in the methodological Chapter 2 of this thesis),

¹⁷ Auto-driven photo-elicitation
Audiophotography*
Autodocumentary photography*
Caption evaluation method
Children's photos/photography by children/child's use of camera/children photography
Community photography
Diary photograph/diary-interview/photo journals
Disposable camera exercise
Field-based interactive photo-elicitation
Hermeneutic photography*
Media collaborations
Native image making/native instant photography
Participant-directed landscape imaging
Participant-generated images
Participatory photo interviews
Participatory photo mapping*
Participatory photography
Photo-communication
Photo-diary
Photo-elicitation
Photo-ethnography*
Photo-evaluation
Photo-narratives
Photo-production*
Photo-annotation*
Photo-essays
Photo-novella/fotonovela
Photo-projective method
Photographic self-presentation
Phototherapy
Reflexive photography
Resident-employed photography
Self-portrait photographs
Visual narrative
Visual voice
Volunteer-employed photography

whether made by the participants or found elsewhere, which is a central component to all the methods that follow.

The different approaches with varying names can often come with a prescriptive toolkit for best practice or will usually be focused on a specific issue or demographic. However, they are often confused or used interchangeably, creating an even greater urgency to start distinguishing and understanding the different nuances and applications of each one of them. It is essential for every practitioner to appreciate these nuances to better understand how they are informed and how they can be effectively applied within their own project framework. This will significantly depend on multiple critical factors; therefore, a 'one fits all' framework will be to the detriment of any project delivery. Consequently, I will briefly outline the primary characteristics and differences of some of the key ones being used below and then propose a model of thinking called Participatory Critical Visual Literacy in Chapter 2, which will encompass key considerations when embarking on a project of this nature.

Photo-elicitation is a one-on-one approach often confused with participatory photography, and it is based on the idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. In this way, photographs become a means to an end rather than serving as an end in themselves. Photo elicitation, initially referred to as photo interviews, was first named by John Collier in 1957 at Cornell University (1986, p.100). Douglas Harper (2002) describes the difference between interviews using images and text and interviews using words alone, which he describes as lying in how we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than those that process verbal information. Harper argues that images have the potential to “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilise less of the brain's capacity than exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (2002, p.13). If we can also think of the visual as offering stimulation to the other senses, then what may be required of the viewer will often combine psychological responses with interpretive ones, amongst others.

Photo-elicitation does not typically involve group work and is an entry point in the other visual methods' interpretative and visual literacy elements. It provides a start for discussions and frames the meanings and interpretations ascribed to the selected photographs. It is a way that can provide insight into participants' personal lives and emotions. The photographs can be created by the researcher or the participants. They could also be found photographs, historical

photographs or photographs from participants' family albums. The research outcomes and the purpose of the interview define the most suitable types of photographs to be used.

Autophotography is a very similar approach. However, it is predominantly used under this name within psychology and would be more broadly positioned within a phenomenological epistemology. Photographs were chosen as a medium as it was hypothesised that visual communication could bypass some of the difficulties participants were experiencing in expressing their sense of self through words. (Ziller and Lewis 1981) The term has been used to examine the use of photographs in a wide range of social and psychological phenomena. It is primarily focused on the idea of the participants' lived experiences.

Photovoice was included in the latest edition of Gillian Rose's book (2016) and in the SAGE Research Methods Map (SAGE Publications n.d.), gaining significant popularity in the last decade. However, it was first coined as a term and described by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997), which appears to be the most cited study about this methodology. This study describes photovoice as a method that builds on three distinct theoretical frameworks. The first is Paolo Freire's work on adult education (2005b), which used photographs to provoke group discussions. His notion of critical consciousness (2005a) through group discussion is still relevant to how meaning is created within this method, how photographs are analysed, and the potential for transformation for the participants through reflection. The second is feminist theory, which posits that women are experts in their own lived experiences with the capacity to make decisions and produce knowledge about their lives and their community. These more broadly used notions relate to feminist ideas of equality and participation within decision-making in community and policy-making. Finally, it sits upon the tradition and critique of documentary photography and issues of representation, which I have discussed in more detail at the beginning of this chapter. By giving voice to individuals who would otherwise not have a platform for expression, photovoice often seeks to encourage personal, social and political change. It can be an essential tool for both academic and socially engaged practitioners. A key contributor to this field is the London-based organisation PhotoVoice¹⁸, which aims to uncover social injustice within a range of communities by prioritising the views and stories of community members through their photographs and captions. Participatory photography is a useful way to uncover precursors to social and cultural inequalities and was initially positioned

¹⁸ A charity that engages in participatory photography based in London more information on the work of the organisation can be found on their website www.photovoice.org

within ethnographic research in a constructivist research paradigm (Breny and McMorrow 2021, p.1).

As a qualitative approach, photovoice has some key characteristics that can be seen in most projects. It is a participant-led approach where contributors are given cameras and photographic prompts in a workshop setting, where the group engages in reflection, discussions and interpretation of each individual's photographs. It often incorporates individual photo-elicitation style sessions. Photovoice projects tend to happen over weeks and sometimes months, and usually include a small group of people who meet regularly. Most projects culminate in producing a body of work that is then shared and usually includes photographs and stories created by the participants.

Photovoice and participatory photography, which is often used as an umbrella term, are essentially the same approaches and, as such, share the same fundamental goals (Balomenou and Garrod 2016). However, participatory photography is a term that is more commonly used within the humanitarian and community justice sector rather than academia (Fairey 2015, p.7). Photovoice has gained in popularity as a term, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the development of this approach for people to engage remotely.

These approaches aim to engage participants constructively so that the final images and captions aren't mere subjective points of view of a photographer as an external observer, which, as described earlier, is a significant point of criticism of documentary photography. Participants take part in the editing and selection process of the images; they are given prompts and asked to respond to them based on their understanding of the questions being addressed. The process of captioning and communicating the meaning accompanying the images is of significant importance within this process. This is part of the analysis of the images, done with and by the participants, to minimise the ambiguity in terms of what is being communicated and reduce the risk of appropriation of meaning beyond the workshop phase. How the images are used and analysed beyond the participant engagement is a crucial point of consideration within the participatory photography process, which I address within Participatory Critical Visual Literacy in Chapter 2.

The interest in visual methods has seen a significant increase in the last two decades across all of academia in which participatory photography is situated. This is partly due to the rise in visual practices because of the advancement of technology and the prevalence of mainstream visual culture. The image started to offer a very accessible way to document, promote and

engage. Furthermore, the same image could be considered an artistic photograph, part of a family album, a social documentary photograph, research data and a representation of ethnographic or visual research. The interpretation and meaning of the photograph could also be changed in different ways to serve different purposes, and the creation of its meaning is becoming increasingly more complex. This multiplicity of meaning within the image requires a deeper understanding of its application within these methods as it opens up the possibility for interdisciplinary approaches to visual practices, incorporating not only anthropologists and ethnographers but visual artists, cultural studies scholars, scientists and consumer researchers, to name a few. This possibility for interdisciplinary collaborations has been redefining visual approaches as a whole (Pink 2013).

Further contributions to the rise of interdisciplinary collaborations include the rise of theory during postmodernism, which provided an increased understanding of the epistemic and, particularly, methodological added value of different disciplines, both within academia and public life. An example of this is the project *Little Sun* by artist Olafur Eliasson, as seen in Figure 4, which includes a multitude of outputs, purposes and potential epistemic values within other areas and disciplines. The project consists of the production of a solar-powered work of art, which also serves as a light. The design was inspired by the Ethiopian Meskel flower, which is the national symbol for beauty and positivity, as stated on the project website. Eliasson collaborated with an engineer to create the light as an object to provide clean and affordable light to the significant number of people living off the grid globally. The lights are distributed through a social business that claims to be sustainable, creating jobs and generating profits for local communities.

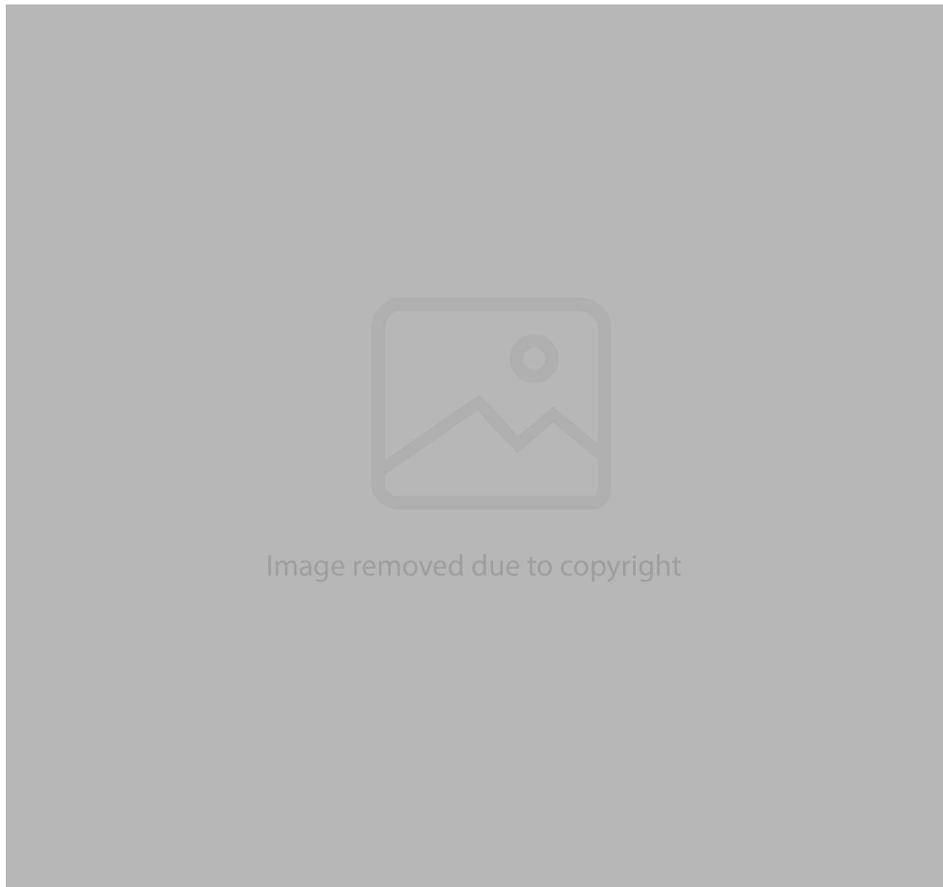


Figure 4 *Little Sun*, 2012, by Olafur Eliasson <https://littlesun.org/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

What is significant about *Little Sun* is that it manages to be, at the same time, an artwork, a utility, a socially engaged business, a scientific endeavour, a social sciences study, undoubtedly an economic and political tool, and last but not least a community based socially engaged art project with multiple and measurable outcomes. Any of these points of entry could make a significant claim about the importance of their contribution. However, removing just one of these components could turn the Little Sun into another solar-powered consumer product you can buy on Amazon. It is precisely the disciplinary crossover and the multiplicity of meanings that make this project effective as a socially engaged artwork. The images created to document, promote and enhance the aesthetics, meaning and purpose of Little Sun undoubtedly play a significant role in elevating the project's research status as a socially engaged artwork.

Interdisciplinary approaches are not without fault, particularly with regard to their use of images. The use of photographs within research across disciplines and visual methods as a whole opens up the possibility for the use of images in an inconsiderate way. A form of misrecognition can occur where an assumed or appropriated understanding of the image and

what it means or represents happens, especially in disciplines outside the sphere of the visual. A version of this can be observed in some visual ethnographic collaborative projects.

An example of using images without careful consideration of their layered meanings and place within the work is the project *Shoe and Tell* (Figure 5), set up at NTU in Nottingham by Naomi Braithwaite. It invites young people to share images of their shoes, focusing on the relationship between identity and footwear. The project is captivating, pertinent and well-considered within its own field. The submitted images consist of young people wearing their shoes, incorporating different vantage points and backgrounds, and disclosing the socks and, partially, the clothes of their subjects. Whilst the shoes are undoubtedly the focal point of these images, what can be considered peripheral actors within these images do not appear to be acknowledged in terms of the subtleties they introduce in how the image is interpreted and understood. Additionally, in order to improve the use and exhibition of the images in this project, it could be beneficial to collaborate with photographers and curators from other disciplines, who could contribute with their expertise on how images are interpreted within the project's framework. This will enable a more interdisciplinary approach to the project and the use of images, leading to potentially better interpretative results. Therefore, the photograph and its function can often be taken for granted within visual collaborative methods.

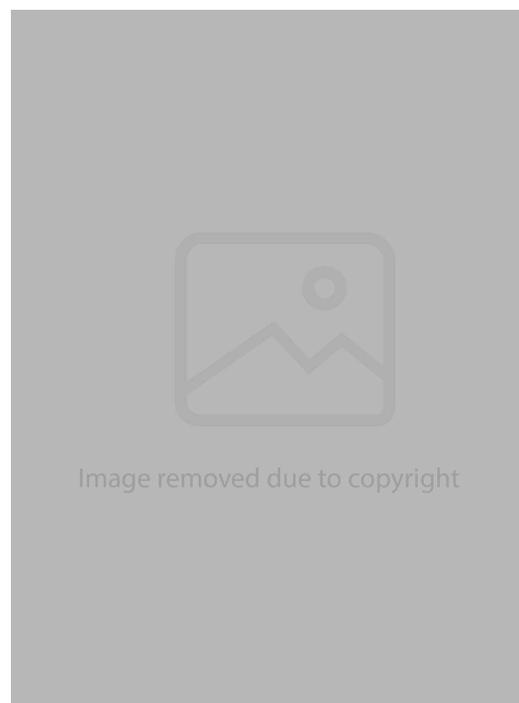


Figure 5 Poster for the Shoe and Tell Exhibition, 2021, by Naomi Braithwaite
<https://shoandtellproject.com/home/> [Accessed on 23 November 2023]

The image can simply become a means to an end; a conversation starter; a useful crutch within a discussion or an interview process; a visceral jarring of the mind to stimulate a memory in conversation; a way to extract the 'real' data with the image to be subsequently undermined or discarded. To support this argument, one does not need to look further than a Google Scholar search with the term 'photovoice project' to find that publications of many social science projects include no images at all. Admittedly, many journals still rarely cater for images within their publications, which speaks about the image's demoted status within academia and research.

The image within the different research paradigms, mainly when being analysed, can't position itself. Therefore, it often seems to oscillate between the modality of objectivity, acting as a superficial agent of truth and evidence, and the modality of subjectivity, where it is relegated to an inferior form of data. This creates an unresolved tension between the image and its adjacent text. Thus, visual research methods, particularly those that are participatory and of a collaborative nature, need to carefully consider the position of the image within them, at both their design and analysis phases. These are important questions, which I will discuss further in the Participatory Critical Visual Literacy and analysis section within Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The study of photography and socially engaged art offers a perspective on the value of the image within its collaborations through its modes of meaning-making, representation, communication and aesthetic attributes, which I will explore in the next section. It is imperative for the different academic domains to engage in cross-pollination when utilising similar collaborative visual approaches and to bridge their epistemic differences by carefully utilising the best approaches relevant to their research projects and effectively learning from their inherent strengths and weaknesses. It is also essential to consider the plurality of voices within collaborative research and their visibility and situatedness within the research. Despite attempts to diminish power differentials within these methods and relationships, they still persist. Therefore, a reflexive approach is paramount to addressing inherent biases within these projects, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

A Review of Socially Engaged Practices and Collaborative Photography

An increasing amount of art has been produced at the end of the 20th century that has shown significant resemblances with anthropological and ethnographic research in their theorisations of cultural difference and representational practices, which has often been referred to as the ethnographic turn in art (Rutten et al. 2013). Similarly to visual ethnography within research, socially engaged art practices aim to explore everyday experiences and their potential for

transformation. They aim to challenge what are traditionally considered both audience and producer (Uzwiak 2016). Artists who engage in these practices have become increasingly popular and, similarly to the research methodologies explored in the previous section, have been discussed within different artistic and theoretical frameworks. They can be found under the following terms within artistic and photographic discourse: Social turn; Collaborative turn; Community arts/photography; collaborative art/photography; Socially engaged practice or art; participatory photography or art, and sometimes also situated art (Bishop 2005; Kwon 2002; Beech 2008; Helguera 2011; Thompson 2012; Kester 2013; Palmer 2020). Some of these terms are often used interchangeably; however, there are subtle nuances and different influencing factors, particularly within photographic discourse, which will be explored in the section to follow.

For this research, I have chosen to use the terms participatory photography and socially engaged practice interchangeably. However, I have observed that, unintendedly, I use a specific term, or a combination, depending on who I am describing the research to, as a form of unconscious way of resolving the underlying tension of not falling neatly into any discipline. Whether a researcher, artist, social scientist or activist from the NGO sector, I tend to choose the most fitting terms within that discipline. This made it even more pertinent for me to understand those subtleties and tensions and the intersection of those different points of entry to understand better the potentially unsettling identity crisis that inevitably comes with cross-disciplinary research and to position this research within the existing practices through the PCVL model outlined in Chapter 2.

Overview of Socially Engaged Practice

As I intend to use it, socially engaged practice is the broader framework of participatory photography and collaborative practices. Before exploring projects and theories specific to socially engaged art within photography, I will provide a wider overview of socially engaged practice, which is highly relevant to understanding these projects and, subsequently, how they relate to photography.

At the crossover to postmodernism, visual art's focus shifted from a predominantly material form within aesthetic formalism to a concept-driven expression of art, where a purely technical, functional or aesthetic mode of production was no longer the norm. A publication by Jason Miller within the journal *Field*, which is specifically dedicated to the criticism of socially engaged art, tells us:

Where once the disenchanted modernist stood ready to safeguard the aesthetic from the corrupting encroachments of a market-driven culture industry, today's artist is all too eager to venture deeply into the waters of political activism, social engagement, and public dialogue. (Miller 2016, p.1).

With the rise of postmodernism within the arts and, therefore, the increasing interest in critical theory, many artists became increasingly political and socially engaged, often criticising systems of power and highlighting social injustices. As a result of this transition to postmodernism, new forms of art resisting the dominant art structures started to emerge. Movements like Arte Povera in Italy took Duchamp's concept of the 'readymade'¹⁹ art further by subverting the Western commercialised art market and starting to use found and natural materials, as well as sound and energy to create their artworks (Christov-Bakargiev 1999). Arte Povera is also labelled 'poor art' because it is meant to discover and utilise what is already there. However, this has an influence not only on 'what' is being produced but, more significantly to this research, who is able to engage in that production.

Fluxus is another radical art movement and collective that started in Germany and spread internationally, where the main factor was experimentation across different artistic disciplines. Fluxus artists focused entirely on the process and interdisciplinary collaboration rather than an intended output (Harren 2016). This would have been a key influence for artistic forms of expression where the process and collaboration become critical factors in the production of the artwork. Thus, more forms of process-driven, socially engaged art subsequently started to emerge.

Dialogical Aesthetics

Grant Kester offers a perspective on dialogue and a critical account of the process within socially engaged art, which he calls 'Dialogical Aesthetics'. This notion explores 'dialogical' activism through art. Dialogic art would locate meaning in the exchanges that take place "via discourse, between two subjects" (1999, p.13). Kester (2013) explains that meaning and identity are not set but emerge through the process of 'dialogical exchange' with the artwork serving as a facilitator for the creation of the dialogue. This is particularly important to the discussion process within participatory photography group settings. I would also propose that

¹⁹ The readymade is a concept in art where everyday objects are presented as works of art. The idea was introduced by Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century by using a urinal and turning it into a piece of art by adding his signature to it. The artist does not create a new object but uses an existing object to turn it into an artwork by changing its context, which became a popular form of artistic expression. This approach challenges traditional production of art and has been used to challenge the role of the artist in society (Goldsmith 1983).

meaning is not fixed but is defined by the collaborative process and the reflections that occur as a result of it, alongside the production of the artistic artefact - in the case of this research - the photograph. The image plays a significant role in facilitating these critical reflections through the process of dialogue, which will be explored further through the model of PCVL in Chapter 2.

Relational Aesthetics

Another very significant influencing notion that seems relevant to this day in terms of theorising the process of socially engaged art was proposed by the French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud in his seminal book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002). Relational art is usually opposed to institutional spaces and operates in a predominantly democratic framework which is not limited to the usual art spectator or participant. What is important about Bourriaud's work is that he theorised the significance of the interactions and collaborations within the process of socially engaged art, and subsequently, how this produced meaning within the artistic outputs. Bourriaud argues in his writing that this is a form of art "taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space... in which meaning is elaborated collectively" (2002, p.5). This is a key point within the concept of relational aesthetics, in reference to how meaning is created collaboratively through the process of interaction; the produced work is in a constant state of flux based on the relations that happen as a result of it. This relational aspect is significant to how the group dialogue informs the process within participatory photography.

Moreover, Relational Aesthetics describes these exchanges between artist and audience as 'microtopias' in that they create a temporary communal connection by becoming a vessel for human bonds. This seems to be a defining characteristic of projects that fall under the domain of socially engaged art. This type of work is often assessed by the process and value of the connections and interactions that take place within the production of the artwork. Relational aesthetics suggests that for these 'microtopias' to take place, the situatedness of the artworks is of great significance. The work is often situated within a specific spatial context that enables the happening of these bonds and contributes to its subsequent understandings. Site specificity needs to be carefully considered when working with people within a community setting; situatedness can be precisely what creates a sense of identity and belonging for the people engaging in collaborative projects.

Situated Art

The importance of where art is situated, discussed by relational aesthetics, within socially engaged practice, is taken further by Miwon Kwon (2002) in her book *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. Kwon offers a deep inquiry into site-specificity as a central theme within socially engaged practices. She argues that socially engaged art moves art from an institutional and cultural site in a social context to the site itself, which becomes the space of production and exhibition. This intervention of site, she claims, requires an artist as initiator, who travels from place to place to offer their services for an intervention, thus marking the exclusivity of a place and becoming the site itself. Kwon also raises important questions related to the dematerialisation of place within site-specificity regarding what this means in a globalised capitalist market.

An example of the artist becoming the site itself could be Suzanne Lacy's recent project, *Uncertain Futures*, conducted in Manchester in 2022²⁰. Lacy's projects often deal with intersectional issues around age, race, disability, class and gender. This project is an example of the potential of interdisciplinary approaches within socially engaged practices that were outlined earlier in this chapter. It was done in collaboration with the social sciences department of Manchester University and Manchester Metropolitan University, the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research and Ageing and Manchester City Council. As a result of her longstanding artistic practice that deals with pressing issues around gender, equity and violence against women, she has been specifically invited to instigate a critical intervention in Manchester as an American artist. Ultimately, the artist becomes the main site within which the project will be operating. In this way, this project also becomes Suzanne Lacy's project, in collaboration with women from Manchester, being scrutinised within research. This is neutral in itself, however, it does raise potentially unresolved and important questions of visibility, authorship and remuneration within socially engaged practices (Burbridge and Luvera 2019), which will be explored further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Kwon discusses this dematerialisation of a site as a way of art moving into a discursive site and explicitly attempting to interact with day-to-day life past the cultural institution to embrace social injustices. An example of this is the work of artist Lisa Selby, which includes running, facilitating, and organising an Instagram account called 'Bluebaglife'²¹. The Instagram profile

²⁰ The project offers collaborations with women over 50 from diverse backgrounds. It aims to explore their conditions to access work, within work and after work. The project outcomes can be accessed on <https://uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk/aesthetic-productions/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

²¹ The account can be accessed via the Instagram handle @bluebaglife

deals with people's lived experiences of drug addiction and incarceration. The work consists of a raw account of different people's experiences, including written narratives and new and old images in the form of an Instagram 'takeover'²². A sense of community and support seems to be an underlying factor for this project, which now has an increasing following of contributors and supporters. One of the project's key aims is to provide a space for support and transformation of those who choose to engage and share on the platform, as well as to raise awareness and transform stigma around addiction and incarceration. Selby's role in this work resembles the role of the facilitator in a collaborative project, which aims to enable the expression and interaction within the collaborative process, despite being situated in the dematerialised site of Instagram - situated within a discursive site "immaterial, intertextual, and broadly social – aptly characterising what is perhaps the most important site for media studies today..." (Cohen n.d.).

Selby's project subverts the traditional use of social media as a space to share the perceived beautiful, happy and accomplished moments of one's life. In this way, her work contributes to the discussion of the situatedness of shared images within the discourse of digital photography and networked cultures. The featured images within the Instagram account, usually consisting of scanned family photographs, exist simultaneously as analogue, digital and networked images, thus crossing and transcending discourse boundaries between these image forms. What was once material becomes computational and, in a way, immaterial.

Socially engaged projects, which consist of screen-based interactions across networked spaces, raise the question of what dematerialised situatedness is and looks like within collaborative projects that are situated within these digital frameworks. Space, time together, and community can now be described and mediated by algorithms and screen-based interactions rather than their embodied counterparts. In a certain sense, "Photographs are no longer things, they're Experiences" (Brooks n.d.). What does this mean in terms of the quality of the connections, the potential for dialogue, and the bonds necessary for the production of these forms of discussions and artistic collaborations? These questions about participatory photography within networked spaces will be discussed further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

²² A person or collective being invited to share and create posts on someone else's Instagram profile for a limited period of time.

The Social Turn in Art and The Collaborative Turn in Photography

Many other contemporary socially engaged artists are progressively looking to expand their parameters of art as they seek to engage with an increasingly pluralistic form of participation and audience. Claire Bishop coins the term social turn and is a prolific writer in the field of socially engaged practice and an avid critic of some of the theorisations of participatory arts. She starts the article "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontent" with the sweeping statement made by the artist Dan Graham: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something more social, more collaborative, and more real than art." (2005, p. 1). Whether that is true or not is irrelevant. However, it does speak to the surge of interest within socially engaged art since this article was published in 2005 and the desire for art to engage with the increasing social and political injustices related to the escalating visibility of inequalities related to class and gender, as well as an understanding of art's ability to influence and enact social change.

The medium of photography has its own specific engagement with these questions of social injustices. The photograph can cut across disciplines beyond art and culture. It can be at the same time a document, an artwork, evidence, a journalistic account, a personal snapshot, a historical artefact, a cultural snippet and a promotional tool. Its elevated status as an artwork is relatively recent in the grand scheme of the history of art. Therefore, collaborative photography should also be examined through its own theoretical, historical and cultural frameworks within socially engaged practice. It is also important for this research to examine the specific role of the photograph within the framework of these practices and its potential (or not) to serve as an agent for critical reflection and human interaction in the process of its production.

Photography has been traditionally seen as a 'solo' practice, romanticised by the idea of the lone photographer traversing the world to photograph its beauty or discontent, which is somewhat of a fiction. As Daniel Palmer points out in his essay "A Collaborative Turn in Photography?" this fiction is perpetuated by "twentieth-century histories of photography – which invariably privilege single authors, even when, as is often the case with professional photography, work is collectively produced." (2013, p.117). Contemporary collaborative photographic practice should also be understood through photography's discursive framework and the precursors, such as community photography and documentary practice.

Community Photography

Community photography emerged in the UK in the late 1960s and 1970s, intending to subvert the established hegemony within institutions, art and culture and ultimately aimed to achieve

social change by challenging the dominant economic, social, political and cultural framework. This was also in line with new modes of thinking around the politics of representation within photography and the rise of theory and critical discourse within academia, as well as a greater understanding of visual culture as a discipline which includes semiotics and media studies (Stacey 2020; Bertrand 2018; Bertrand 2015).

The emergence of community-based photography was also accelerated by the fact that photography was undergoing a transformation as an art form during the 1960s: up until that point, photographs were not widely present in institutional and museum collections. As a result, critics and galleries and generally those in charge of arts funding increased the number of photography-based initiatives, and photography experienced unprecedented expansion (Bertrand 2018).

Several photography collectives emerged that engaged in a form of radical visual culture. Initially, primarily in London, these included the Hackney Flashers, NPCD²³, BPP²⁴, the Exit Photography Group, and the one that seems to have left the biggest mark due to its affiliation with the *Camerawork* publication: *The Half Moon Photography Workshop*. These collectives were predominantly working against the power relations between observer and observed inherent to the medium of photography, as described at the beginning of this chapter. Community photography aimed to offer alternative narratives by providing people with the freedom to choose how their lives are represented as a form of subversion to the stereotypes of consumer-focused imagery mass-produced by the few who were privileged to be able to do so. This also included collective structures with a lack of hierarchy in the organisation, production, dissemination and consumption of the work created. These groups were in search of alternative methodologies and approaches, which often involved collective efforts and collaborations in contrast to the photography sector at the time, which valued high-profile practitioners who would embody the romanticised idea of photography as a sole practice.

Jo Spence, an artist, activist, and photographer, and one of the founders of the *Camerawork* publication, made a profound and significant contribution to the development of community photography. Her essay, "The Politics of Photography" (1976), published in the first *Camerawork* magazine in 1976, clearly outlines and discusses these emerging practices and the form of photography they are ultimately resisting:

²³ North Paddington Community Darkroom

²⁴ Blackfriars Photography Project

Every day, photographers produce countless images, most of which will never be seen by a mass audience. However, those that are seen in newspapers, magazines and on high streets hoardings play an important part in our lives. With their messages - both explicit and hidden – they help to shape our concepts of what is real and what is normal. They give us information about the sort of sex roles we are expected to play in society, contributing to our images of ourselves, to our expectations and to our fantasies. (1976, p.1)

The article proceeds by describing practices of representation within media and documentary photography that have been undignified for the people they represent. Furthermore, the article describes community photography at the time, which involved small pots of funding and photography collectives with people being enabled to document and discuss their daily lives. "Here photography can be explained to and used by lay people... this puts photography into the hands of a lot of people that eventually will be able to dispense with the experts" (Spence 1976, p.1). These ideas are still pertinent to this day, and it is important to understand the mark this work has left on socially engaged practices.

Television, cinema and all visual media echo the same ideology. Continually repeated visual images, in time, become part of our stored experience. Images help us to believe that people are innately aggressive, intelligent, loving or lowly – according to their sex or race, or to the idea being sold to us. All this we tend to call 'human nature'. (Spence 1976, p.1)

What these perpetuated visual tropes are doing is reinforcing stereotypes through the use of photography. Images present realities that are internalised as natural and instinctive. Based on this, how are these realities created, to what purpose, by whom, and for whom? Jo Spence's work made a significant contribution to understanding some of these questions. In her book *Cultural Sniping* (1995), she talks about photographers codifying reality at the point of production and the bias they bring as a result. Spence notes that in documentary photography, "what has been most ignored is the labour process...the real world that most of us wake up to every day of our lives." (1995, p.41). Her work left a legacy on the understanding and role of personal photography in political and social life. Photography as a vernacular practice ultimately becomes political. Community photography and the work of Jo Spence have significantly influenced the subsequent development of collaborative photography. Her work

contributes significantly to the development of socially engaged photography and the importance of personal images in transformation and social change.

It is important to mark the contribution of community photography to the development of the following socially engaged practices and to situate its place within this dynamic field. Anthony Luvera, socially engaged artist, educator, writer and editor of the periodical *Photography for Whom?*, in the first issue, explores the roots of community photography, which has been significantly underrepresented within the discussions of socially engaged practices (Luvera 2020a). Community photography has initiated the democratisation of social photographic practices away from professional photographers who were gatekeepers of this process. Community photography also aimed to critically question photography's role in shaping our understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and the ideological narratives embedded within it. It aimed to encourage people to produce images that served as counter-narratives to the established visual messages delivered through images in the mainstream media.

Phototherapy and Therapeutic Photography

Jo Spence's work, developed in collaboration with Rosy Martin, also contributes to collaborative photography through the work they referred to as phototherapy. They initially considered it as an autobiographical piece of work, however, it explored broader ideas of identity, politics, gender and social roles (Spence 1986). Through the process of engaging in discussion and critical reflection, one can potentially gain a greater understanding of their circumstances and the social conditioning that operates within them, and therefore, gain the ability to enact a personal change which can then, with the accumulation of critical mass and sharing of these ideas and stories gain the potential to lead to broader social change.

This mode of collaboration is intended to improve someone's wellbeing and understanding to provide greater awareness of their internalised patterns and behaviours. It attracted considerable interest during the democratisation of photography through digital photography, the development of technology, and the internet. Numerous psychologists, academics, councillors and photographers were curious to explore the potential of the photograph as a tool for reflection, exploration and collaboration (Weiser 1998; Berman 1993; Loewenthal 2013; Gibson 2018; Nuñez 2009). Linda Berman, in her book *Beyond the Smile: The Therapeutic Use of the Photograph*, argues that the "concept of paradox is highly relevant to both therapy and the photograph because each in its own way reflects the ambivalence and confusion of life...it also resides in the fact that it can be public and personal, general and specific." (Berman 1993). This ambivalent nature of the photograph is persistent in all its modalities, and like in

Spence and Martin's phototherapy work, a photograph can refer to both the personal and the broader social and ideological narratives.

Phototherapy and Therapeutic Photography, through the use of photographs, aim to facilitate the release of difficult emotions, often unconscious, so that an aware exploration of those can occur within an environment held by a trained facilitator. However, not all of these modes of working involve a qualified therapist. Instead, they typically fall under therapeutic photography, which only requires an artist and a sitter or a group of participants. While these projects can lead to personal transformation due to the awareness that critical reflection on photographs can bring, they can make difficult emotions surface. They should be engaged with caution due to the lack of professional therapeutic support that can end up being more harmful to the people who ultimately engage with it. Despite the best intentions of photography practitioners, projects of a therapeutic nature open the possibility for undesirable and potentially damaging outcomes as a result of therapeutic photography collaborations (Loewenthal 2013). Unlike therapy and counselling, which require extensive training, there are no training requirements or regulations for undertaking therapeutic photography. Therefore, therapeutic work involving photography, for this reason, has been widely criticised by the therapy community, and it is advised to be approached with caution.

An example of keen photographers interested in the therapeutic domain of photography that can unintentionally cause more damage can be discovered in many areas of photography but very acutely in those that engage with questions of body image. Photography has been complicit in perpetuating unrealistic body standards, especially for women. Still, it can also be part of the solution by creating counter-visual narratives, which is often the aim of many of these projects. However, they also carry the risk of inadvertently reinforcing these unrealistic beauty standards and objectifying the female body further. For example, this can happen by unintentionally asking sitters to re-enact the very same internalised visual tropes that perpetuate these very beauty standards. A subtle example of this is the collaborative project *Rock Your Ugly: A Middle Finger to Toxic Beauty Standards* by photographer Waleed Shah, who claims to offer a 'raw and unfiltered' look into the lives of everyday people. This work constitutes remote collaborations with volunteers interested in his project. However, upon examining the cover (Figure 6) of his book, we see a depiction of a relatively young and slim woman who reveals her body and assumes the very poses, that perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes of female beauty.

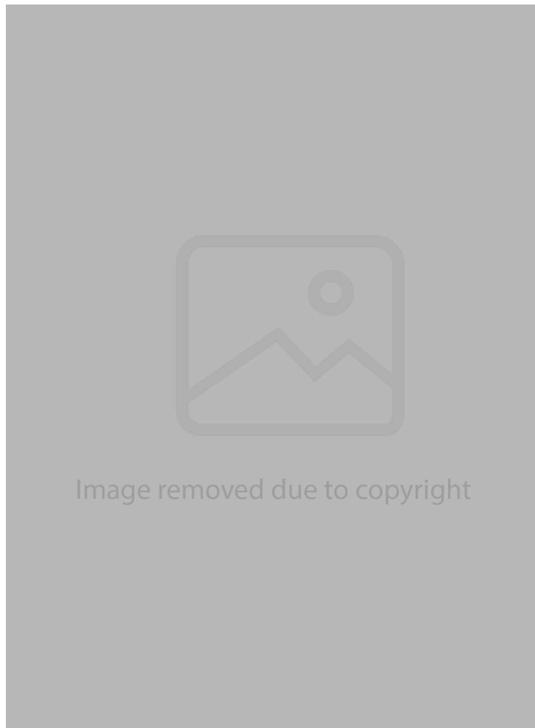


Figure 6 *Rock Your Ugly: A Middle Finger to Toxic Beauty Standards*, 2021, by Waleed Shah <https://www.waleedshah.ae/rock-your-ugly/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

A contrasting example is the work of artist and academic Cristina Nunez, who has developed an approach named "The Self-Portrait Experience" (Figure 7). In her approach, the sitter is given a remote cable shutter for the camera and is asked to go through several emotions. The sitter is subsequently encouraged to capture the deepest part of their experience without any intentional or unintentional posing. This method provides a very different representation of the body.

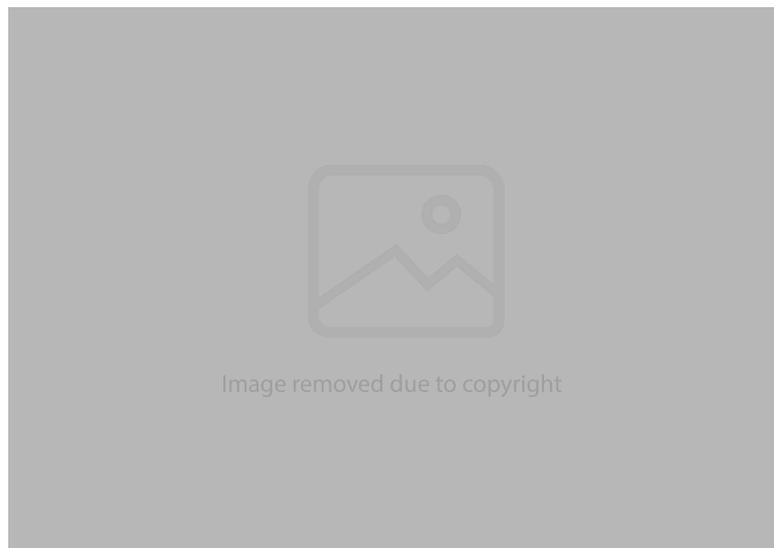


Figure 7 *The Self-Portrait Experience*, 2008, by Cristina Nunez <https://selfportrait-experience.com/the-method/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The therapeutic use of photography often relies on the photograph enabling, through production, reflection and discussion, the access and awareness of suppressed or unconscious beliefs, thoughts and emotions. The link between the unconscious and the photograph is not a new concept. Walter Benjamin notes: "Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious" (1972, p.7). Benjamin was interested in exploring how photography offered unprecedented access to the domain of the unconscious, in potentially revealing aspects of everyday life that cannot be seen, but he never developed a specific theory of unconscious perception. However, he seemed to be aware of the value of photography to enable the processing of everyday lived experiences through the concept of vision, which Rosalind Krauss takes further in her book *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), focusing on art as a whole. However, there is a need for more exploration in understanding the link between the photograph and the unconscious, as noted in *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*: "What has gone relatively unexplored are the ways that photography mediates our experience and knowledge of the world in unconscious ways" (Smith and Sliwinski 2017, p.1).

Therefore, the personal transformation and potential realisations resulting from these projects are not exclusive to explicit therapeutic photography collaborations. Whilst these are the main objectives for these projects situated within this modality of collaboration, they are often intentionally or unintentionally secondary by-products for most participatory and collaborative projects. Although most projects might not necessarily aim for therapeutic transformations, they often aim to increase wellbeing, self-confidence, critical awareness, and sense of agency. Therefore, it is important to understand the use of photography in these therapeutic practices and how they overlap with participatory photography.

Collaborative Photography in Practice

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?

(Foucault 1984, p.350)

Foucault, without specifically referring to socially engaged art, muses over what constitutes a piece of art and the possibility of people, life and lived experience becoming one. This is particularly pertinent to projects within collaborative photography, which deal with personal

narrative and lived experience through photography. Photography lends itself particularly well to this concept because it allows people to document their lives as they experience them, which is central to the process of participatory photography.

Giving a 'voice' to the people who are subjects of the photographs started to become a central theme to artists beginning to challenge the power discrepancies between photographer and subject within documentary practice. An early attempt at collaboration involved practitioners challenging photography's ability to represent by introducing personal narratives and captions, giving some of the control to the people who were the subjects of their photographs. These attempts also often involved photographers spending more time getting to know the people they aim to photograph. The work of Jim Goldberg is a relatively early example of this. In one of his first projects, *Raised by Wolves* (Figure 8), Goldberg spent time building relationships with his sitters and collaborated with them in choosing the setup of the photograph. However, he still retains his primary role as the camera operator. The people in Goldberg's photographs would give advice and feedback on what they would change and what perhaps didn't feel right within the photographs. As part of the collaboration, he invited participants to handwrite a caption on the photographs themselves. In an interview on the Magnum website, he shares that "Having people write directly on photos was a way to access their thoughts" (cited in Rosen 2021). By doing this, Goldberg attempts to ground the photograph and its subjective meaning with the intention of the person depicted within it. The selection of a name for Goldberg's project raises some ethical considerations, which are not to be undermined, and questions that relate to decisions beyond the photographs constitute a significant part of the ethical dimensions of collaborative photography. Ultimately, collaboration was initially only understood in the sense of photographic production. However, there are significantly more factors to be critically considered within the use of power, authorship and visibility, which will be explored further in Chapter 4.

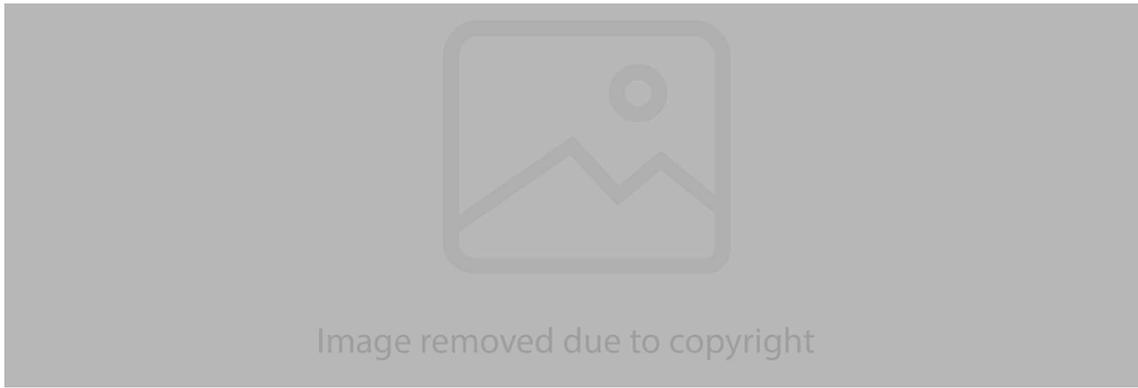


Figure 8 Hollywood Freeway #1. "Napoleon plays chicken, hanging over the wire guardrail of the Hollywood freeway", 1989, by Jim Goldberg <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/jim-goldberg-raised-by-wolves/> [Accessed 24 November 2023]

Different iterations of collaborations based on participant enquiries and captions have been undertaken by other photographers who sought to question photography's ability to represent. In these collaborative projects, using captions as a form of storytelling becomes significant in challenging photographic language and its potential subjectivities. Another recent example is the work of British artist Gillian Wearing, which aims to challenge precisely this: the portrait's ability to represent, 'portray' and offer a truthful account of an individual's identity. In her portraits, Wearing asks her subjects to hold a sign which says how they are 'actually' feeling, which often contradicts what appears to be depicted within the photographic portrait, as seen in Figure 9. This highlights that the photographic gaze provides a contradictory account within the practice of representation and questions how identity is understood through photographic portraiture.

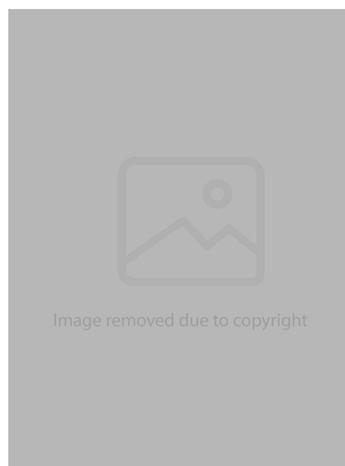


Figure 9 "I'm Desperate" from *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say*, 1992-93, by Gillian Wearing, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wearing-im-desperate-p78348> [Accessed 24 November 2023]

Other forms of collaboration in the West also started to emerge, where photographers were willing to challenge the boundaries of their practice even further by choosing to relinquish significant control over the photographic process. Collaborative initiatives started to open up to the general public and were open to collaborations not only to those specifically operating within the domain of community photography. An example is the *Handsworth Self-portrait Project*, which started in 1979 and was set up by Derek Bishton, Brian Homer and John Reardon outside a terraced house in a suburb of Birmingham (Figure 11, Figure 10). Their project included a white backdrop hung outside the front window, and a few meters away, on a tripod, a camera was set up with a cable release. People were invited to take self-portraits, which the artists hoped would constitute a large 'community family album'. This work has also undoubtedly become an important documentary account and archive of the lives and people from their community at the time.

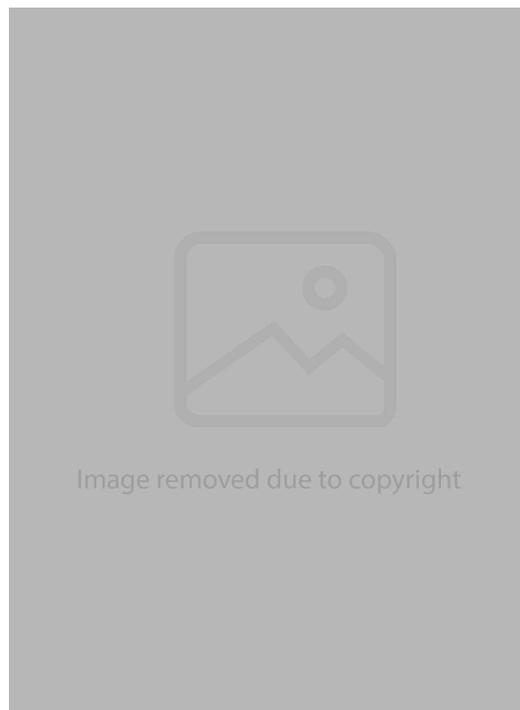


Figure 10 *Handsworth Self-Portraits*, 1979, by Derek Bishton, Brian Homer and John Reardon
<https://www.instagram.com/handsworthselfportrait/?hl=en> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

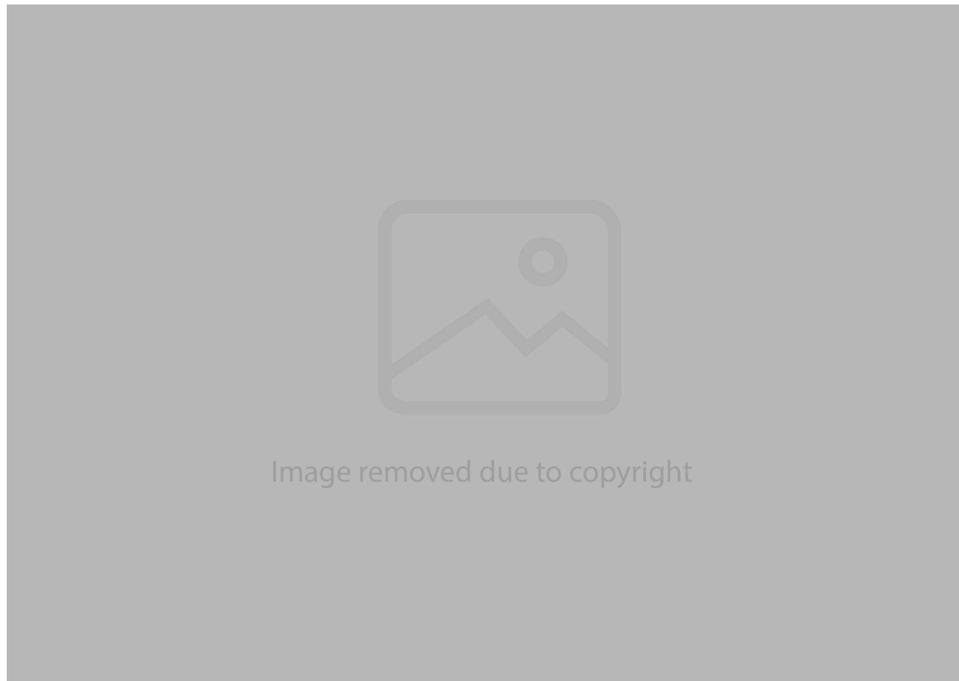


Figure 11 Handsworth Self-Portraits project set up, 1979, by Derek Bishton, Brian Homer and John Reardon
<https://www.instagram.com/handsworthselfportrait/?hl=en> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The remote shutter mode of working has been utilised by other photographers, including Cristina Nunez in her process called "The Self-Portrait Experience" (as mentioned previously), but more prominently by artist and educator Anthony Luvera. In his practice, he takes the ethics of representation further by combining several approaches, including participant-generated photographs, archival research and what he has coined as a term for his work - "assisted self-portraits"²⁵. The most recent iteration of his ongoing work on homelessness, called *Agency*²⁶, includes work done in collaboration with a group of people within Coventry in the UK. The process of Luvera's work includes regular group meetings with the participants to establish a positive group dynamic that would enable a space for critical reflection of their lived experiences and the photographs they produced. Furthermore, through the assisted self-portraits, participants would have undoubtedly increased their understanding of photography and their use of images. The work from this project was published in a 'community-style' newspaper, which provides an overview of the process, participants' work and their assisted self-portraits. Moreover, Luvera appears to take great care in the levels of participation within his projects, where he encourages his collaborators to document their understanding of the collaborative process and to participate in the dissemination of the work, which is usually beyond the workshop phase of production; participants are encouraged to engage and speak at exhibitions and conferences.

²⁵ More information on this process can be found on the artists website <https://www.luvera.com/project/photographs-and-assisted-self-portraits-2002-ongoing/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

²⁶ This work can be seen on the artists website <https://www.luvera.com/works/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

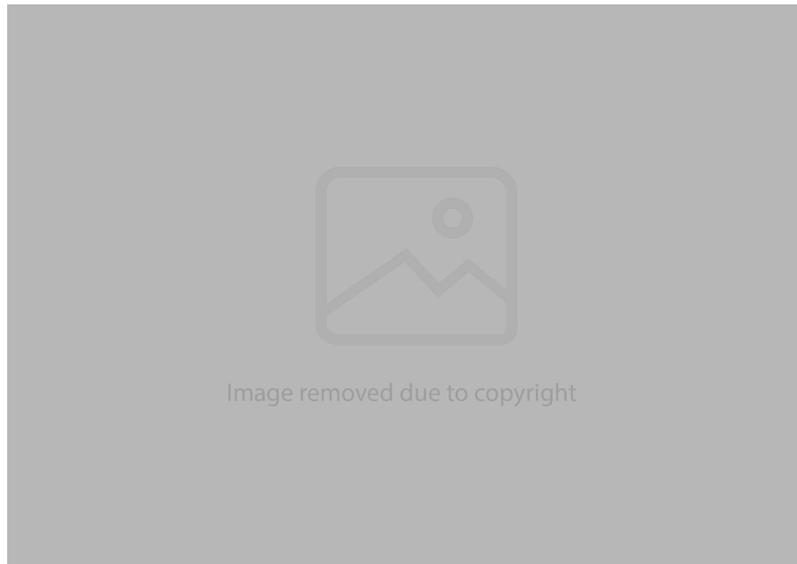


Figure 12 *She/Her/Hers/Herself*, 2023, by Anthony Luvera
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn9EQRloW5P/?img_index=2 [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Furthermore, in Luvera's most recent work, *She/Her/Hers/Herself* (Figure 12), he has worked over a period of 5 years on a long-term collaboration with Sarah in Belfast to create a body of work that is claimed to be created together through the process of reflection, thus completely blurring the lines of ownership and authorship within the production process. The work raises essential questions of issues related to identity and gender, also within photography, and focuses on how Sarah sees herself and wants to be seen by others. Ultimately, Luvera's latest project, which was recently exhibited at Belfast Exposed, highlights the changing role of the photographer within socially engaged practice.

Most of the examples so far, in some form, bear a resemblance to the real world, which is traditionally a quality that documentary photography aspires to in its quest for a truthful and authentic account of events. An example from practice that radically challenges this notion of documentary photography and blurs the lines between truth and fiction is the work of Edgar Martins in his recent project on incarceration, *What Photography & Incarceration Have in Common with an Empty Vase* (Figure 13). The work oscillates between real and imaginary photographic accounts of the participants and their family members and their experiences of incarceration. His work goes to great lengths to challenge the traditional modes of representation and stigmas around imprisonment. The presented work blurs the boundaries between fiction and evidence, incorporating visual, textual and other details. Thus, Martin's work ultimately addresses the function of the photograph and the juncture of ethics, visibility,

aesthetics, and documentary practice more widely by proposing a new way of understanding what is happening beyond the frame of the image.

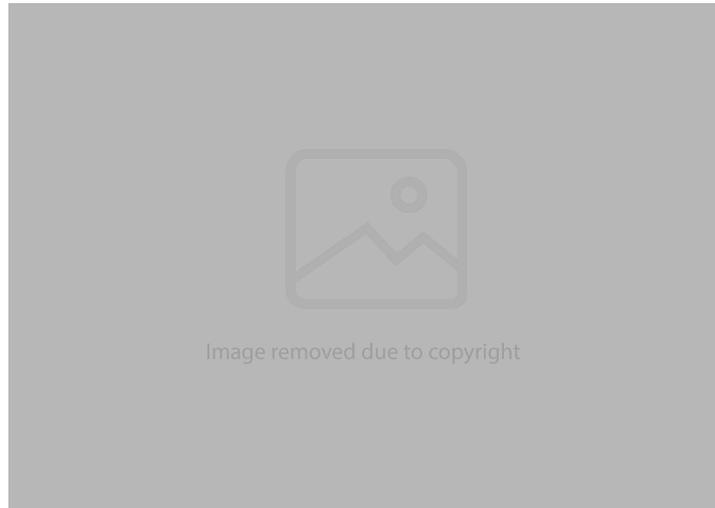


Figure 13 *What Photography & Incarceration Have in Common with an Empty Vase*, 2019, by Edgar Martins <https://edgarmartins.com/work/photography-common-empty-vase-2018-2019/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

An important example that pushed the boundaries of collaboration further and is more closely aligned with the process of participatory photography is the highly influential work of artist and educator Wendy Ewald. Her approach, which she initially called Literacy and Justice through Photography, involved asking children in the classroom to take photographs of their aspirations and each other, which they captioned. This project, which turned into a pedagogic approach, consisted almost entirely of images taken by the children, then published into a book and developed as a method for working with students in the classroom. Her work is still used as inspiration for collaborative artists to this day. One of her initial projects from 1975, *Portraits and Dreams* (Figure 14), was ahead of its time as it consisted entirely of images generated by the participants. It aimed to uncover the lives, dreams and fears of the schoolchildren within the community. The project was revisited in 2020, and through the children's photographs, one can connect with their domestic and southern rural lives and those of their families. In working with children and using photography, Ewald points out that she wanted "to challenge categorical distinctions between art and documentary photography, between photographer and subject, child and adult." (2007, p.21).

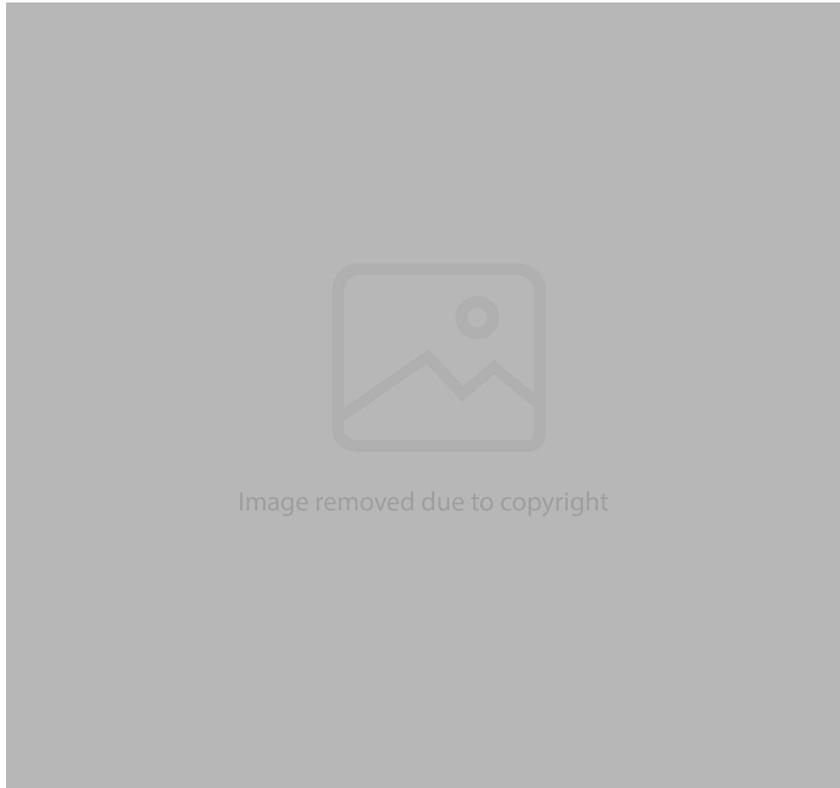


Figure 14 *Portraits and Dreams*, 1976, by Wendy Ewald and Children Participants
<https://wendyewald.com/portfolio/portraits-and-dreams/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Ewald's work highlights the importance of critical reflection that the participants engage in, in the attempt to make sense of their images and create their captions. It also shows the unique place that photography holds as a medium in the process of socially engaged art because of its ability to document real life by those who experience it directly, thus subverting the traditional hierarchies of power within society through engaging in self-representation. In this way, Ewald's work challenges social norms and the understanding of identity by amplifying the experiences and stories of the people she works with in her projects. Ewald's work is foundational within collaborative and participatory photography as it is one of the earliest accounts of an artist utilising and creating a body of work that incorporates almost entirely participant-generated images. These participatory photography examples²⁷, in which the work consists entirely of participant-generated images, raise important questions about the assumed roles of the artist within these projects and the power dynamics that are at play within them

²⁷ Further examples of participatory photography projects consisting entirely of participant-generated images are the work of Jim Hubbard and his project *Lives Turned Upside Down*. He enabled four children to photograph their experiences of homelessness. Furthermore, the work of artist Alexa Wright, *Piecing it Together*, facilitated a group of people who have experienced a deterioration of their mental health to express their experiences through the use of images and visual collages.

because they go beyond the notion of collaboration, questioning the process of production and the role of the artist as I explore further in Chapter 4.

Further practices that have a crossover with participatory photography and where the role of the artist becomes even blurrier are projects that are promoted on a mentoring model rather than a participatory one. An example is the project set up by the photography organisation Magnum, *Write Your Legacy*²⁸, where a transfer of expertise is assumed between a professional photographer and an aspiring photographer. These projects usually involve a group of organisers, where artists can undertake multiple roles. They might need to assume the role of an artist, facilitator, curator, educator and mentor and, at the same time, none at all. Therefore, how these projects are promoted and the role of the artist within them need to be established with a level of transparency. The requirements of every project necessitate ongoing careful negotiation and reflection, which is a skill that is maintained through continuous reflection and critical discussion.

I am often asked what I photograph as a collaborative photographer, a dreaded question with no straightforward answer. I photograph nothing. Probably not nothing at all, but certainly less than what the average person photographs on their camera phone on a daily basis. I am a non-photographing photographer who does not want to contribute to the production of images that perpetuate and reinforce oppressive and hegemonic visual narratives. Despite the lack of images I have created, I have a huge archive of photographs produced by participants within my practice. As a socially engaged photographer, I suspect that I am not alone in this predicament. Therefore, questions of power and ethics become incredibly important in terms of authorship, ownership and visibility, as well as how these projects are promoted and set up.

Participatory Photography and Ethical Considerations

The photographer and the photograph are in constant flux within the framework of power, visibility and, therefore, ethics. How these play out within socially engaged practice depends on many factors, which I will explore further in Chapter 4. The increasing interest in socially collaborative art "has also prompted an ethical turn in art criticism" (Bishop 2005). This includes increased attention to how projects are designed and set up, the nature of the collaborations and the level of participation. Azoulay discusses the possibilities and importance of "the

²⁸ The exhibition from this project can be seen on <https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/en/exhibition/3695608/write-your-legacy> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

photograph as a source of civil knowledge” (2015, p.124) through the process of collaboration. However, she also points out that it should not be explored in isolation:

...the assumption that collaboration always already lies at the basis of the event of photography; collaboration is its degree zero, as photography always involves an encounter between several protagonists in which the photographer cannot claim an a priori monopoly on knowledge, authorship, ownership, and rights (Azoulay 2016, p.189)

Therefore, thinking about collaboration entirely in terms of photographic production or the photograph itself is not enough to understand its meaning and implications, but the process of its production and context are equally important.

Participatory arts projects are often filled with buzzwords and enthusiasm within funding projects, like "the promise to empower", which have been scrutinised by practitioners like Tiffany Fairey in participatory photography (2015, p.139). Therefore, it is increasingly important to carefully consider creating achievable and transparent project objectives with a level of awareness of the hidden power structures embedded within the process and the language used around it.

Claire Bishop raises important questions in terms of how we assess projects within research and socially engaged art:

For supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanises—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this *political* task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: The notion that there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I [Bishop] am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyse, and compare such work critically as art. (2005, p.179)

Bishop makes a valid point that, increasingly, projects are assessed purely through the framework of ethics and social impact rather than assessed in terms of their value and function as artwork. This highlights the increasing importance for the disciplinary crossover of these

collaborative practices to be understood and incorporated within their process of production and evaluating them holistically through their social impact, their input within research, and their artistic production.

Hal Foster argues that both art and ethnographic research have displayed interest in each other's practices but also a high degree of ignorance of how methods, paradigms and practices were established within each field, which potentially can lead to a series of misrecognitions between art and visual sociologies, including anthropology and ethnography, as he notes: "What misrecognitions have passed between anthropology and art and other discourses?" (1995, p.304). Furthermore, he ultimately suggests that artists and cultural producers can benefit from the methods and techniques of ethnography. These practices include participant observation, fieldwork, and collaboration with the study subjects. By adopting these approaches, Foster believes that artists can create more socially and politically engaged works. Additionally, it can help artists better understand the cultural and social context in which their works are produced. However, Foster also acknowledges that using images in ethnographic work can be problematic. He stresses the need for a more critical and self-reflective engagement with the use of images in cultural representation. Therefore, artists and ethnographers must be mindful of the power dynamics involved in producing and consuming images. They must ensure that their work is ethically responsible and socially engaged. Each of these scholarly fields and collaborative approaches has its own unique strengths and shortcomings, demanding critical consideration of the ethical implications and creative approaches to visual representation.

Participatory photography also often operates at this intersection of artistic practice and ethnographic inquiry, a space frequently marked by tensions between photographic creative expression and the rigorous demands of ethnographic inquiry, highlighting the need for a critically reflexive approach to the collaborative interdisciplinary processes of image production and interpretation. As Luvera states: "The value of interdisciplinarity is in how the convergence of discourses and methodological enquiries can enable visibility to be identified in new ways" (Luvera 2021). To navigate these complexities, I introduce in the next chapter the use of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy within participatory photography, which I refer to as PCVL. It emerges as a bridging reflective framework, integrating the reflexivity of ethnography with the creative freedom of artistic practice, fostering a holistic approach to participatory and collaborative photography.

PCVL also highlights the importance of considering the function and artistic value of the resulting images while critically evaluating the social, ethical, and contextual dimensions within which these practices operate during production and interpretation. Therefore, participatory photography remains the answer to addressing some of the complexities and ethical dilemmas related to photographic representation. However, as I will explore further through the lens of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy, these inquiries often raise more questions than provide concrete answers, especially regarding questions related to the process, the function of the image and its ethical encounter with alterity. This emphasises the need for an ongoing critical dialogue about the intersection of art, photography technology, research, and participatory photography ethics.

Methodology: A Conceptualisation of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy

'The illiterate of the future ', it has been said, 'will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph' But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures?

W.Benjamin (1972, p.25)

Walter Benjamin's quote serves as a suggestion that understanding the process of visual literacy as applied to participatory photography requires not only the ability to create images but also that it is essential to view the production and consumption of photographs critically and reflectively. This is especially true in a landscape of mass communication, social media, neoliberalism and the prevalence of visual culture, where images exert influence on what we choose to buy, how we choose to look and contribute to shaping our understanding of who we are and how we comprehend the world and our place within it. Participatory photography places an emphasis on enabling participants to explore their personal stories and reflect on their lived experiences. However, a common lack of critical understanding in the production and use of images within participatory photography can potentially push participants and the communities they represent further into their social categories. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on dialogic interpretation, reflection, and contextualisation within participatory photography regarding the production and sharing of images through a critical lens, along with the use of visual literacy that goes beyond merely understanding the technical aspects of photography, which this research aims to address.

This research uses participatory photography as its primary methodological approach. It focuses on the visual stories of a group of young women facing unemployment who are active social media users. The research emphasises the use of critical approaches to producing and interpreting images, which was essential in ensuring that the photographs served the project's aims and respected the participants' agency rather than reinforcing further inherent and unconscious biases and gendered stereotypes. Therefore, in this chapter, I introduce and reflect upon the PCVL reflective model that underpins my participatory photography methodology, offering a reconceptualisation of existing notions of critical visual literacy. Building upon the broader concept of visual literacy and drawing from Newfield (2011) and

Chung's (2013) articulation of critical visual literacy as a pedagogic tool for engaging with power, identity, and representation through images in educational settings, this chapter proposes a reconceptualisation of CVL within the context of participatory photography. To distinguish this reflective model from previous iterations of CVL, I refer to it throughout this thesis as Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL).

PCVL within this research is approached not only as a means of interpreting images but also as a collaborative and reflexive process embedded in image production. This approach is informed by the HumanCamera²⁹ process, which encompasses a critical approach to the production and interpretation of images within group settings. This reframing of CVL into PCVL also builds upon an existing understanding of visual literacy and critical literacy, emphasising the importance of a process-oriented, relational, dialogic and critical approach to visual literacy within participatory photography.

PCVL is underscored by a poststructuralist theoretical framework with key themes rooted in situated knowledge production, creative practice, temporality, subjectivity, and meaning-making within visual culture. Within the PCVL reflective framework, visual literacy is approached with the understanding that photographs possess artistic merit yet do not hold a fixed meaning and are not grounded in a single objective truth that can be solely understood through the acquisition of visual literacy skills. PCVL suggests that images should be interpreted within their production and viewing context and that they should be understood, produced, and analysed through a critical lens of social and group power dynamics, incorporating dialogic modes of critical reflection and interpretation within the creative process. PCVL is represented by the reciprocal structure, the significance of which will be described in the following subsection of this chapter.

The use of PCVL within participatory photography is an original methodological framework, which is a key contribution to knowledge as part of this research. The PCVL model also takes into consideration the role of technology, networked spaces and online engagement within this project. It encompasses eight fundamental tenets: Creativity, Context, Self-Representation, Group Work, Critical Reflection, Interpretation, Outputs, and Transformation. I propose and use these eight key areas as specific points of consideration and reflection in my participatory photography practice as applied to this research. Responding to the architectural reciprocal

²⁹ A participatory photography process I developed as part of my work as a founder of the organisation HumanCamera

structure, which emerged as a metaphor for the process of PCVL and participatory photography throughout this research, the model is used as a 'thinking space' to address essential ethical, theoretical and logistical questions and concerns that may arise throughout the practice. This chapter explores these significant critical concerns to further identify and establish the most appropriate methodology for the research.

A participatory and creative way of working requires a model of non-linearity, flexibility, creativity and reflection that is considered within a specific context, issue and timeframe; what might be a valid structure in one project could pose a risk in another. Therefore, any attempt to create a prescriptive model of working would only be valid for one specific project and applied to the detriment of another. As a result, PCVL is intended to outline key points for consideration that are common to all aspects of participatory projects, particularly in moments of uncertainty. Rather than a definitive toolkit or a prescriptive framework, PCVL takes into account how the shifting components, such as Context, Self-Representation and Group Work, all play an essential role at recurring stages within participatory photography, including the production, interpretation and dissemination stages of the project. Equally, it is a model that does not make claims in terms of 'what should be done', but rather what to think about. Viewed as a 'rhizomatic'³⁰ approach, it is used as a non-hierarchical and non-linear model of thinking when developing, planning and doing.

Building upon the insights gained in the review of collaborative practices outlined in Chapter 1, the development of the PCVL model has also drawn upon my own expertise and reflections as a practitioner within this field and within my practice of HumanCamera. Furthermore, with the increasing pertinence and need for a critical approach to visual literacy within contemporary culture, its underrepresentation within participatory photography highlighted the need to develop a conceptual framework that could provide a clear methodological grounding to my work. By expanding on how the PCVL model was applied in the setup, delivery, and outputs of this research, the following discussion of the PCVL reflective framework will help underpin the processes and analysis involved in the project *Who Are These Women?* and its respective exhibitions, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

³⁰ The concept of the Rhizome is associated with the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari from the book *A Thousand Plateaus* which is a concept that challenges traditional notions of hierarchy and linearity in thinking. They argue that meaning is not fixed or predetermined, but rather emerges through the connections between various elements. The rhizome is characterized by its non-hierarchical, non-linear structure, and its ability to connect any point to any other point. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.3)

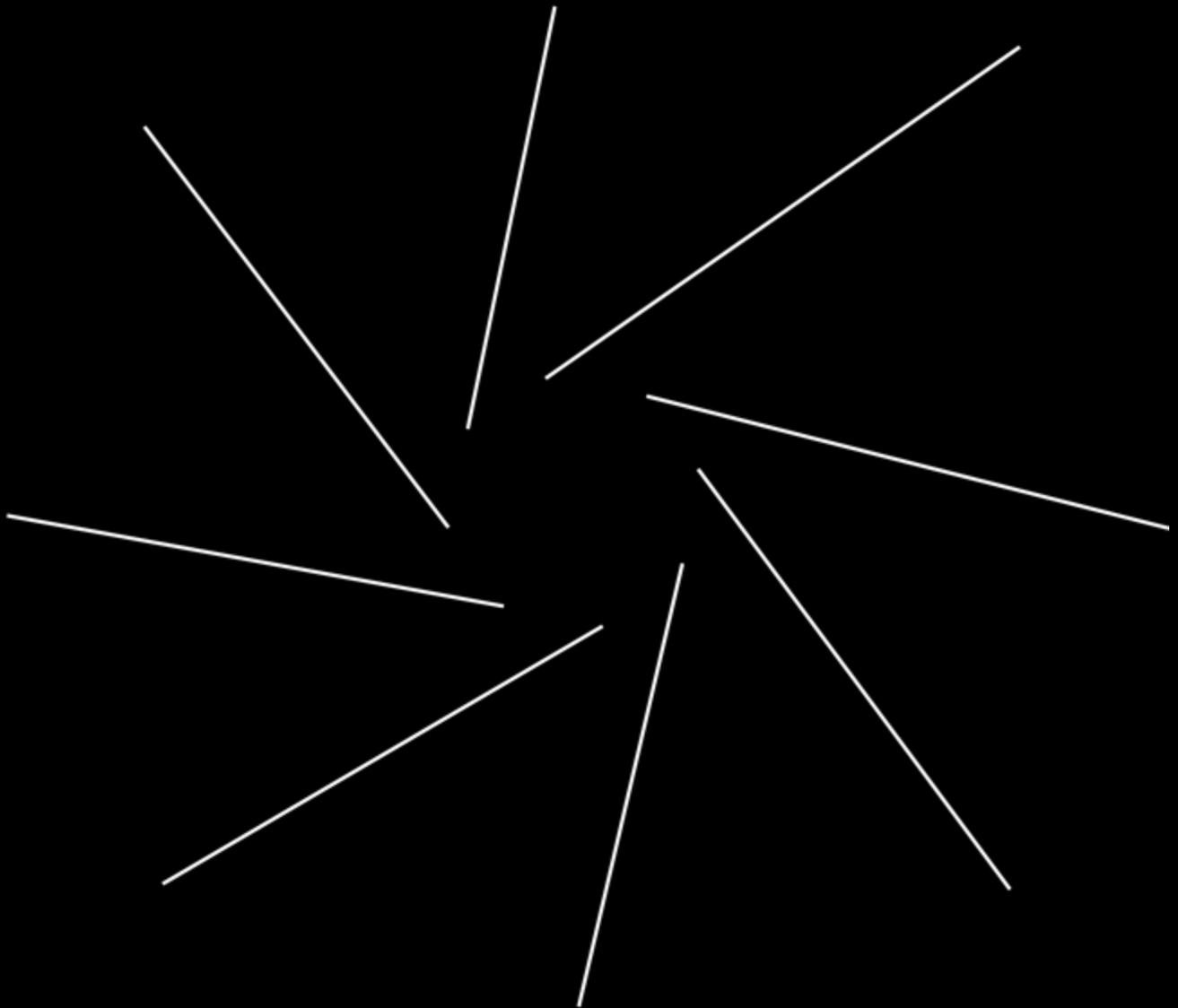


Figure 15 The initial design of the reciprocal structure that was used as a layout of the virtual exhibition space for Who Are These Women?

The Reciprocal Structure

The Reciprocal Structure, Process and Temporality

A reciprocal structure is an architectural design (Figure 16) that is supported and powered by a network of connected, self-supporting elements. If constructed correctly, each part of a reciprocal structure supports the weight of the other members, resulting in a solid and balanced framework (Parigi and Kirkegaard 2014). Due to the way support is distributed within the structure, its strength is derived from the sum and connection of its individual parts. It often assumes a round shape and consequently leads to the formation of a circle at the centre of its arrangement. Thus, the arrangement and integrity of the structure require the reciprocal support of all its 'members', as well as the formation of a circle, which also serves to symbolise the process within this research. Like the process, the structure will simply not exist without its supporting members. This supportive arrangement of the reciprocal structure points to the central notion of participation within this research. Using this as a model for PCVL emphasises the importance of collaborative decision-making and participant agency within this project. Decisions were made collectively from the beginning, and the outputs were discussed, agreed upon, and decided on collectively as a group.



Figure 16 This is an example of an architectural reciprocal structure. The photo is used with the permission of the Hughes Family.

The initial version of the reciprocal structure within this research, as seen in Figure 15, was an adapted version of the architectural structure as seen in Figure 16 and was initially intended to serve as an architectural design for the online exhibition space for this research. This version will also serve as a foundation to illustrate the essential components of the PCVL methodology for this project. It later developed into several symbolic iterations (Figure 17) within my research, the significance of which I will elaborate on in Chapter 4, and more specifically, the technological implications and insights for applying PCVL within networked spaces and engaging participants entirely online. When I was initially thinking about designing a virtual exhibition space, I wanted to create an environment that was not anachronistic or simply replicating the ubiquitous 'white cube'.³¹ Instead, I saw the virtual space as an opportunity to design and create a viewing experience that furthered the meaning of the work we had created together: representative of the group as both the sum and connections between its individual parts.

Ensuring that the collective does not overshadow the individual perspective, it was also important to design the exhibition space in collaboration with the participants, in a way that honoured and made a clear distinction between each woman who took part in the project, their identity and their unique perspective while at the same time coming together as a coherent whole. Through discussions on how a space can embody and represent these ideas as well as provide a non-linear, non-hierarchical viewing experience, the initial iteration of the structure was designed in collaboration with an architect. As a space with no explicit beginning or an end, the reciprocal structure was subsequently implemented within the 3D virtual exhibition and later within the 2D exhibition in its stylised version, becoming emblematic of the process and of the project overall (Figure 17).



Figure 17 The three iterations of the reciprocal structure. Left to right: 1. The digital reciprocal structure. 2. The hands reciprocal structure used for the design of the 2D space 3. The reciprocal structure for the 3D exhibition

³¹ The 'white cube' refers to the aesthetic of contemporary gallery spaces, usually characterised by square or rectangular rooms with white walls and floodlighting from above.

Process as Practice

Reality is not only everything which is, but everything which is becoming. It's a process. It proceeds in contradictions. If it is not perceived in its contradictory nature, it is not perceived at all. B.Brecht (cited In Mirzoeff 2011, p.477)

The non-linear and non-hierarchical viewing experience that the supportive structure provided also has a deep symbolic meaning in the research process and, therefore, in participatory photography in its attempt to disrupt the power differentials³² within photographic representation. However, prior to the reciprocal structure's incorporation, I had already established a routine for documenting the participatory process within the pilot workshops (a detailed account of which can be reviewed in Appendix A). I was prepared to do the same for my main study. However, as the main workshops had to be delivered remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a completely different form of documentation had to be undertaken. How does one capture a process that presents very few visual stimuli to be documented? As Brecht notes in the quote above, the process is not "everything which is, but everything which is becoming" (cited in Mirzoeff 2011, p.477); therefore, the documentation process, in a way, can only represent 'how' it happened, not 'what' happened. It was in the contemplation of this within the virtual space that the subsequent iteration of the reciprocal structure serendipitously presented itself and started to unfold metaphorically. Metaphorically, it came to represent the immaterial process we went through within the networked virtual space, explored further in Chapter 4.

The process, as part of participatory photography, is inevitably key in shaping the outputs and transformation and knowledge that takes place as a result of it. Like other artistic practice-based research approaches, collaborative art practices generate knowledge based on embodied experiences that challenge traditional forms of academic research. These practices also create a kind of tacit knowledge that can never be fully articulated, but which is embodied in the processes of collaboration and participation. Robin Nelson, who writes extensively on practice as research, acknowledges that the process of practice as research involves "doing-

³² Participatory photography, as discussed in Chapter 1, seeks to disrupt and or diminish the power discrepancies within representational practices within documentary photography between the subject and the photographer. Equally, the reciprocal architectural structure has no central support, but is formed through equal 'participation' of its parts.

thinking” cycles of experimentation, reflection, and refinement (2013, p.19). He proposes the model of “know-how, know-what and know-that”³³ (2013, p.37). Building on Nelson’s proposal, participatory photography also depends on an evolving embodied and tacit knowledge³⁴, including how images are used and produced; the reflective discussions around them through visual literacy activities; the development of contextual information; as well as the lived experiences³⁵ of individuals and their interactions. The digital iteration of the reciprocal structure, as seen in Figure 18, provides a representation of this cyclical, iterative engagement that is also representative of the process of engagement throughout the workshops.

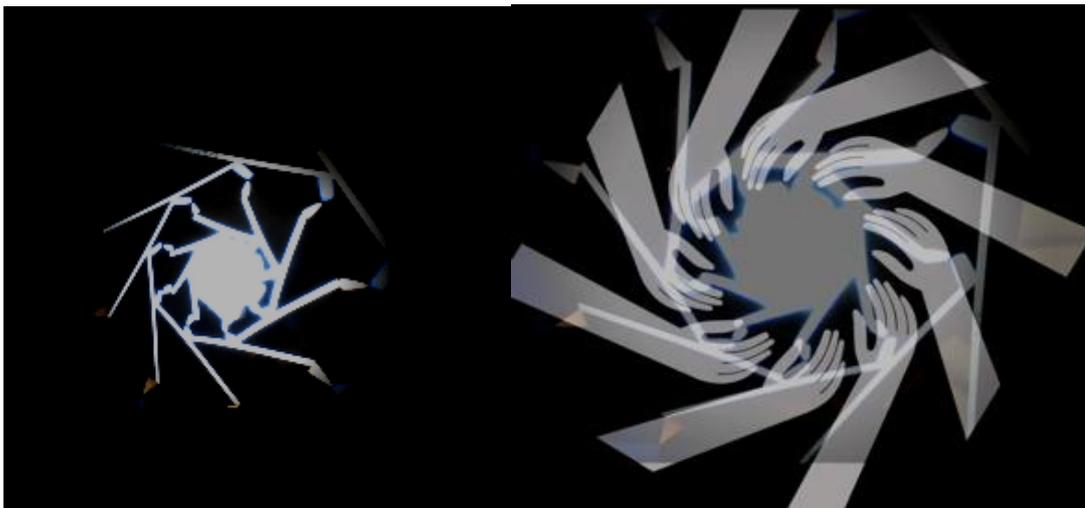


Figure 18 The Reciprocal structure in motion <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232215/368/727>
[Accessed 23 November 2023]

In the context of process philosophy³⁶, becoming is a fundamental aspect of reality. It implies that the world is continually undergoing change and flux rather than being permanent or static. Reality is viewed as a constantly evolving process in which new possibilities, structures, and forms develop over time rather than being fixed and static. Deleuze further emphasised the significance of ‘becoming’ in his work, viewing our relationship with time as an essential component of reality. According to Deleuze, the process of becoming is not linear or

³³ Robin Nelson describes arts praxis through an iterative model that includes “know how” as the starting point which includes: “experiential, haptic knowing; performative knowing; tacit knowledge; embodied knowledge” and which is then followed by “Know what - the tacit made explicit through critical reflection” and finally “Know that ‘outsider distant’ knowledge” which includes “cognitive propositional knowledge” (R Nelson 2013, p.37).

³⁴ “Loosely speaking, tacit knowledge, refers to ‘knowing something without being able to tell it’” (Gourlay as cited in Lämmlli 2022, p.96)

³⁵ The lived experiences and expertise of the participants who “...experience life in a personal, situated, political, embodied, subjective, and often contradictory ways.” (Liamputtong and Rumbold 2008, p.67)

³⁶ Within process philosophy Alfred North Whitehead creates a comprehensive and in-depth theory of process in which reality is viewed as a complicated web of connected incidents, or “occasions of experience.” The intricate patterns and structures that we see in the world are a result of these experiences, which are always moving and changing. The significance of the connections between events and the ways in which they influence one another is emphasised by Whitehead’s theory of process (Whitehead 1978).

predictable but is instead marked by singularities or sudden changes in direction (Deleuze 1994). Likewise, artistic practices particularly foster flexibility, with new connections and the unexpected providing alternative perspectives or directions unbound by predefined outcomes that result in not necessarily new but different kinds of knowledge. Practice as research encourages artists and researchers to engage with the unknown, navigating through uncertainty and allowing unexpected outcomes and insights to emerge. This is particularly true for participatory photography and PCVL. They require an entirely flexible framework, the ability to relinquish control within the process, as well as within the production outcomes and their subsequent interpretation. The outcomes are ultimately marked by the group dynamics, collective decision, context, and critical discussions that take place within the collaborative process.

The process within participatory photography is also often characterised by embracing uncertainty, arising both within the iterative nature of group discussions and in the transformative journey of exploration and discovery by each participant. Therefore, in researching through participatory photography, the research must respond, adapt and change according to the contexts it encounters. Participatory photography is not only an artistic practice but a social one; it is subject to the conditions of multiple perspectives, times and knowledges. This iterative and process-driven nature of this research is represented within the digital reciprocal structure in the way each tenet supports the other, and a cyclical formation is present at its centre, resembling a spiral or a propeller that is ready to be activated by temporality, as seen in Figure 18.

In *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Paulo Helguera contends that “socially engaged art is a form of performance” (2011, p.x) that requires a deep understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which it is created and received, and that this understanding must be embodied and experiential. Therefore, the temporal nature of the participatory photography process, as a series of relational embodied events constantly evolving and transforming and thus becoming, can be paralleled with ideas of the performative. Erin Manning (2009) suggests that our bodies are more than just passive vessels that transport our ideas around the environment. Rather, our bodies are active in producing and influencing our experiences. As a collective of bodies, therefore, each is actively contributing to the experiences of the group. Innately temporal and subject to ongoing emergent conditions, this produces what Manning refers to as a ‘relationscape’. Considering the temporality of social practices and the ways of knowing it produces are, therefore, a cumulative result of relational encounters. Unlike other forms of material art, its performative aspect can only exist in the moment of its happening. Experienced

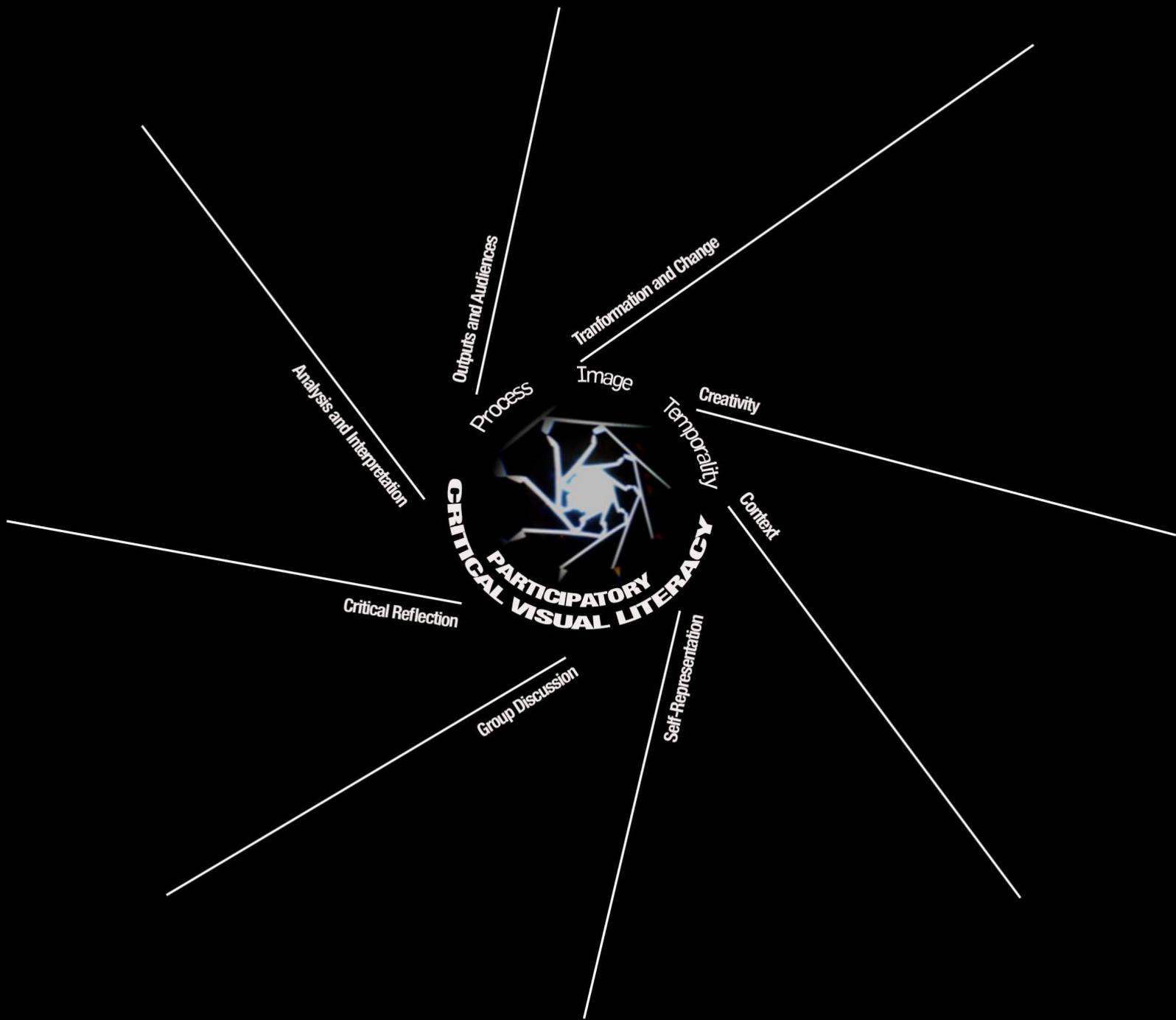
in real-time - in its moment of becoming - each experience is unique, unrepeatably, and therefore uncertain. Subsequently, the documentation of the process and its outcomes are also partial. Despite the attempts to document and use reflections and metaphors to represent the experiences and the process that took place within this project, these attempts can only capture a fragment of what was primarily an embodied experience specific to this group, this project, and this point in time. A lot of what happened will be fully understood by only those who were part of this specific project and moment in time. In this sense, within participatory photography and collaborative practices, the process becomes the practice, emphasising the subjectivities and the knowledges that are generated within the research *Who Are These Women?*.

Process, Temporality vs Outputs

The ideas of performativity, temporality and time are also not new within the ontology of photography and its theoretical discourses (Barthes 1981; Sontag 2014; Batchen 1999). However, the relationship between process, time and photography in relation to socially engaged practices is best elaborated in Anthony Luvera's essay "The Participation of Time within Photography", in which he notes: "To read temporality in the photograph is to see the image as a narrative form lifted from a process of duration and change that doesn't necessarily correspond to a linear connection between past and present" (2020b, p.51). When considering temporality in a photograph, one should not just be looking at the image itself but also taking into account the broader context in which the photograph was taken. This can entail understanding the sequence of events that led up to the moment of the photograph, as well as the events that followed it. In doing so, an understanding of its temporality allows the image to be seen as a narrative form. However, the process of duration and change can also be complex and nonlinear: a photograph can capture a moment that is disconnected from the moments that precede or follow it. Therefore, interpreting temporality in a photograph requires thinking beyond a simple linear progression of time and instead requires consideration of the complexity and nuances of the process.

Consequently, what characterises the process of participatory photography in relation to other forms of dematerialised process-based art is the use of the photograph and its relationship to reality, time and space. The process and the photographic outputs are entangled and operate continuously and in conjunction within the collaborative project. Therefore, the images produced in participatory settings become encoded versions of a process – an image-based 'relationscape' only fully understood by those who were part of their creation. They are a record of a moment, which is also a product of an iterative, critically reflective, and creative

process. Further, moving beyond the moment of the image, they encompass a complex set of situated and contextual discursive circumstances, actions, relations, critical discussions and decisions. By placing the process and images at the centre of the reciprocal structure, rather than a static form, it is thus activated through temporality, as seen in Figure 18 and Figure 19.



Participatory Critical Visual Literacy

Figure 19 The reciprocal structure and the eight key tenets

A Proposition for Participatory Critical Visual Literacy

Eight Key Tenets

Building on the existing understanding of critical visual literacy within education and discussions on visual literacy, critical literacy, and critical consciousness, which I will explore in detail in this section, I outline the key underpinnings of the process of PCVL within participatory photography. The subjective meaning of images is in a continuous state of flux, dependent on the context of their creation and consumption. The 'knowledge' embedded within these images is born from the process of critical reflection and accumulated through discussion and dialogue. Therefore, PCVL within participatory photography is derived and driven by the collaborative process, with temporality and image as cyclical and iterative forces at the centre of the reciprocal structure that activates it, as seen in Figure 18 and Figure 19. Supported by eight key tenets, as seen in Figure 19, these include Creativity, Context, Self-representation, Group work, Critical Reflection, Interpretation/analysis, Outputs and Transformation. There are synergies, spillovers, and overlaps within each of the eight areas, recognising that concepts and concerns will occur and recur in different places in non-linear and often uncertain ways.

Participatory Critical Visual literacy is a journey, not a destination. By engaging in PCVL, participants in the project are taking part in a creative process within a specific context to develop their own interpretation, visual style and narrative. By enabling participants to share their stories with others, they are invited to challenge their own understanding of the world as well as their perceptions of dominant cultural narratives and power structures. In developing this framework, I drew inspiration from existing practices reviewed in Chapter 1, as well as the fields of critical literacy, visual literacy and the power of collective dialogue, art and affect theory, semiotics, slow looking, critical reflexivity and ethnographic research, and finally, psychoanalysis and phototherapy to formulate the understanding of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy. I specifically focus and reflect on the application of PCVL within networked spaces, and the implications and use of technology for this project in Chapter 4.

I believe that creating the model of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy is crucial for reflective thinking and planning in participatory photography and fills a gap in the current methodological

practice and literature, both as a reflective model and its application within networked spaces. Central to the project's process and its potential for transformative impact, PCVL enables the production of artwork that is culturally meaningful and effective, as well as being valued as art. It also proposes to bridge the gap between artists³⁷, who can engage with the methods and techniques of ethnography, and ethnographers, who must engage with the visual and aesthetic aspects of cultural representation as discussed at the end of Chapter 1. By collaborating or learning from each other's practices, they can create a more ethical and artistically effective approach to participatory photography.

Each attempt at defining visual literacy and collaborative photography practices to date appears to have been constructed to fulfil a subject-specific agenda, making a cohesive interdisciplinary consensus very hard to achieve. As Roland Barthes comments on the issue of interdisciplinary subjects - "In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a "subject" (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one." (Barthes 1989, p.72). Recognising that Participatory Critical Visual Literacy does not have a singular 'home' but gains inspiration from many places. It is a reflective model of doing and thinking about participatory photography within networked spaces. It highlights the process, discussion and critical approaches to producing images within participatory photography. It aims to highlight how each of the disciplines that engage and utilise participatory photography as an approach can complement each other to achieve a method that builds on the strengths of each of them. In doing so, it aims to create outputs that uphold a high profile within all of these domains. PCVL is a way to ask questions and seek answers through the process of reflection. It is not intended as prescriptive and operates in a similar way to Nelson's model of practice-based research, which suggests "an acceptance that knowledge is not fixed and absolute" (2013, p.39). In the sections below, I will explore the role of each of the eight areas and introduce how these were applied to *Who Are These Women?*.

A Review of Visual Literacy, Critical Literacy and Critical Visual Literacy within Education

Visual Literacy

Visual Literacy, or what I expand on as Participatory Critical Visual Literacy, constitutes a central part of the process of participatory photography. In utilising photography as the medium

³⁷ As Helguera asserts "Artists who wish to work with communities, for whatever reason, can greatly benefit from the knowledge accumulated by various disciplines - such as sociology, education, linguistics, and ethnography - to make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences." (2011, p.xiii).

through which to work, the ongoing iterative interactions between the images, the participants and the group provide the basis for creating meaning, transformation, and critical reflection. As a term widely used by multiple disciplines, visual literacy and its role within participatory settings remains utilised but sufficiently underexplored. Therefore, the following section provides a brief overview of current discourse regarding visual literacy before introducing a proposition for PCVL relation to collaborative practices.

Visual Literacy, as contradictory as it may be as a term, is a valuable expression for a very pressing problem (Elkins 2007, p.3). In the 21st century, the ubiquity of the visual is no longer defined by its consumption but by the active creation of images by non-specialised entities and individuals. The democratisation of the camera through new technologies such as the camera phone and sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat have provided an immediacy that has enabled photography to become the preferred means of self-representation and expression. Consequently, visual literacy has become increasingly important (Mirzoeff 2013). No longer relevant only in the realm of the visual arts, in the so-called “bain d’image” (Avgerinou 2009, p.28), it is an essential communication tool that everyone must be able to navigate: i.e. to be visually ‘literate’.

Consequently, many scholars from different disciplines have tried to define and discuss the term³⁸ visual literacy with little consensus, resulting in a “definition problem”³⁹ within the field (Seels 1994). Despite the difficulty that visual literacy has faced with scholars lacking consensus, important and significant theoretical investigation⁴⁰ has been taking place over the past half

³⁸ Although it likely appeared earlier within general discourse, visual literacy was first officially used in academic writing in the late 1960s by Debes, one of the founders of the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) (Fransecky and Debes 1972). James Elkins, in his book *Visual Literacy* talks about the term appearing intermittently in a search of newspaper and magazine databases over the course of over a hundred and fifty years (Elkins 2007, p.1). A term that continues to be under debate, Cassidy and Knowlton in their paper “Visual Literacy - A Failed Metaphor” (1983), argued the inappropriateness of the term due to its obviously contradictory nature. David Sless (1984) argued that their proposition missed what is valuable in the metaphor and that visual literacy is not so much a failed metaphor as a failed opportunity. Today, the idea of ‘reading’ an image does not try to avoid the contradiction it causes, nor does it try to improve on it, but it starts with the shortest form of the contradiction itself (Elkins 2007, p.1).

³⁹ In a quest to form a holistic definition, visual literacy has borrowed theories from disciplines such as cognitive/gestalt psychology, neuropsychology, sociology and cultural anthropology; communications theory and semiotics education, philosophy, aesthetics/art, linguistics, instructional design, educational technology, screen studies, visual perception, anatomy of the eye and mental imagery (Avgerinou and Pettersson 2011). It is not surprising therefore that identifying the connection of visual literacy with the theory and practice of all these disciplines has proven to be quite perplexing. As Burbank and Pett describe, it is like the problem the six blind men faced when describing an elephant: one described it like a wall; another like a spear; a third was certain it was a snake, a rope, a fan or a tree, etc. Visual literacy has resulted in a similar outcome, coming to infer different meanings depending on one’s point of view (Burbank and Pett 1983, p.1).

⁴⁰ The first provisional attempt for a definition was done by Debes in (1972). He describes visual literacy as a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and, at the same time, including other sensory experiences. He also claims that the development of these competencies is fundamental to everyday human

century. One of the key points that was identified by Debes and Fransecky (1972) is that visual skills can be learned, as identified by the IVLA⁴¹ in 1997 (Avgerinou and Pettersson 2011). This argument within the field opens the discussion and attempts to pinpoint what these skills and competencies may be and how they can be broken down and obtained. However, it seems to reduce being visually literate to the level of language and reading. A consensus, from this constructivist perspective on visual literacy, is that it consists of a set of acquired abilities (Ausburn and Ausburn 1978; Burbank and Pett 1983). W.J.T. Mitchell (2009, p.11) describes visual literacy as a seemingly unavoidable metaphor that looks at and compares how skills, competencies and expertise can be obtained to the level of mastery of language and literature. Therefore, attempts to describe what a visually literate person can do appears to remain embedded in the realm of education, rather than trying to define what visual literacy is within broader theoretical frameworks.

Cassidy and Knowlton, in contrast, argue that the ability to understand images is acquired naturally as a form of 'maturation' of the mind over being a learned skill. They also point to studies of the left-brain right-brain duality as evidence of a potentially innate visual understanding: "We do not know how to teach the right brain or if it 'needs' teaching or if it indeed is even teachable." (1983, p.85). Therefore, an argument can be made that the way we interpret images cannot be explored through the linear framework of reading – specifically working against reading as a predominately linear form. The utilisation of 'literacy' within the term could be seen at the heart of the problematic scholarly dilemma surrounding visual literacy. Similarly to Cassidy and Knowlton, James Paul Gee, an education scholar, contends that literacy is not the acquisition of a set of abilities but rather a social and cultural activity, including complicated power relations and the negotiation of meaning (Gee 1989). Literacy, and therefore visual literacy, can also be understood as a form of practice that requires continuous engagement rather than purely an acquired set of skills.

The described epistemic differences in the understanding of visual literacy can broadly be placed within two opposing theoretical paradigms. The first one is images as text and the ability to read them through a constructivist paradigm. The second is from a poststructuralist perspective, where the meaning of images is continuous and unfixed and can be explored

learning, and when developed, they allow a person to interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made encountered. Through the creative use of these competencies, one is able to communicate with others as well as enjoy and comprehend the masterworks of visual communication (Fransecky and Debes 1972, p.27). Clearly, this definition was a good starting point, as elements from it can be identified within subsequent attempts to define the term.

⁴¹ International Visual Literacy Association

through their cultural, contextual and affective dimensions. Situating the research within these dichotomies, the proposed PCVL model works to bridge these epistemic differences by placing an emphasis on the critical approach to visual literacy, whereby images are understood “from submission to the power of the image to resistance to its structuring codes and discourses, from reading with the text to reading against the text. This is a crucial shift, one that must be made consciously.”(Newfield 2011). Equally PCVL does not disregard symbolic, aesthetic and visually constructed meanings within images or their affects but takes into account visual literacy as a process that is iterative, continuous, affective and critical, it recognises that while there may be momentary outputs, the overarching process is not concerned with an end goal or a skill that is attainable, like reading. Therefore, in this research, visual literacy is understood as a form of critical literacy through an ongoing iterative process: as a way of critically and reflectively interpreting images within a broader cultural context.

From Critical Literacy, Critical Consciousness and Critical Visual Literacy within Education to Participatory Critical Visual Literacy

The concept of critical literacy was first introduced by Paulo Freire, whose work has significantly underpinned the initial efforts of participatory photography within research by Caroline Wang and Marry Anne Burris (Wang and Burris 1997). Freire’s work on adult critical pedagogy, literacy, and consciousness remains as pertinent as ever, providing one of the most appropriate frameworks for inquiry when considering the relationship between critical thinking, consciousness, and participatory practices. Freire argues in his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), that literacy is not only a technical ability but rather a process of critical inquiry. A liberation tool that emphasises the importance of contextualising literacy practices within wider social and political struggles.

Freire proposes the idea of critical consciousness in his book *Education for Critical Consciousness* (2005), which is based on the idea of conscientization, where he distinguishes between two stages of consciousness: magical (naïve) consciousness and critical consciousness. He makes an important contribution to the idea of critical reflection that has underpinned the theoretical framework of participatory photography. He proposes the idea of ‘conscientization’, which is a process of achieving critical consciousness by raising awareness of the systemic economic, political and social forces that shape people’s reality and their potential ability to transform them. He proposes a transition that can take place through the process of ‘Conscientization’ from an oppressive or naïve way of thinking to critical consciousness, which can be achieved through group dialogue, reflection and critical awareness of one’s position

within society. Freire also proposes the idea of the “culture circle”⁴². He suggests that by working together to develop solutions to the problems that they have identified, participants can take part in creating a more equitable society. Furthermore, Freire’s proposition on “critical consciousness”⁴³ can be seen as a model for developing and transforming one’s level of critical literacy.

Lankshear and Maclaren build on Freire’s initial work to include postmodern ideas and propose in their book *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern* (1993) that critical literacy is a pedagogical approach that enables individuals to reflect on the social construction of language, knowledge, and power and actively participate in improving their own environments. Therefore, critical literacy can be understood as a way to reflect on the use of language and its inherent biases within society. Situating these debates alongside Derrida’s work on ‘deconstruction’ - a key theoretical framework within poststructuralist thought – current understanding of critical literacy closely align. Derrida indicates that people often use language without fully comprehending its full meaning or contemplating the possible consequences of their words. Deconstruction also emphasises the necessity for thoughtful communication and awareness of words’ inherent power structures. It also encourages critical reflection in understanding what underpins our communication habits and the language we use to connect with others. As images have become an increasingly significant part of contemporary culture and communication, they play an essential role in shaping our beliefs, values, and attitudes. Derrida notes “You could speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended” (Derrida cited in Richter 2010, p.ix). Therefore, photographs as a form of expression and communication should be interpreted and used with the same critical attention as words and language. As suggested in this research, Participatory Critical Visual Literacy attempts to elevate visual literacy from its purely technical and aesthetic characteristics within participatory photography to approaches aligned with deconstruction.

⁴² For Freire, a culture circle positions the reflective dialogue amongst students and teachers as central to the development of critical literacy and includes several steps of understanding. Initially, understanding the context in which they are operating by locating power and privilege as well as other systemic issues that operate within it. By engaging in reflective dialogue and critical thinking, individuals may begin to build a greater awareness of the complexities of their lives and the way existing issues affect them and other community members. The next step in the process involves interpreting and analysing any available information for any patterns and connections that can provide further evidence for the root causes of identified social issues. Finally, critical literacy involves taking steps towards transforming the social, cultural, and political structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression (Freire 2005b).

The term critical visual literacy has also been utilised and explored by a small number of scholars within pedagogy and art education, who share a similar trajectory for CVL within their context of exploration (Newfield 2011; Chung 2013; Kim and Serrano 2017; Schieble 2014; Grimm and Meeks 2017). Most notably, Newfield (2011), a pedagogy scholar who undertakes a concise comparative study of the shift from the notion of visual literacy to critical visual literacy within education, makes a similar suggestion that critical visual literacy, unlike visual literacy, operates in the “deconstruction spirit” (Newfield, 2011, p. 92). While Chung (Chung 2013, p.1), an education scholar, applies the CVL term in context of art education, highlighting the importance of shifting objectives towards employing poststructuralist, semiotic, cultural, and social theories in art education. This approach encourages a re-examination of the human subject as someone who actively constructs meaning from and is influenced by visual culture in response to it.

Furthermore, influenced by Barthes’s ideas of ‘text’ encompassing communication media to include artefacts beyond words (Barthes 1977), Chung builds an argument for critical visual literacy within visual culture pedagogy, claiming that it encourages students who engage with visual texts to “... observe [these] texts carefully and analytically, decoding their ideas, intentions, points of view, and biases; placing them in a sociopolitical context; and ultimately creating their own texts to delegitimize unequal power structures.” (Chung 2013, p.6). Similarly, Newfield argues that texts operate by “positioning us,..below the level of consciousness”, and what critical visual literacy can do is provide a framework to bring these to awareness. Thus, he concludes that the shift from visual literacy to critical visual literacy is characterised by the transition “from reading *with* the text to reading *against* the text” (Newfield 2011, p.92).

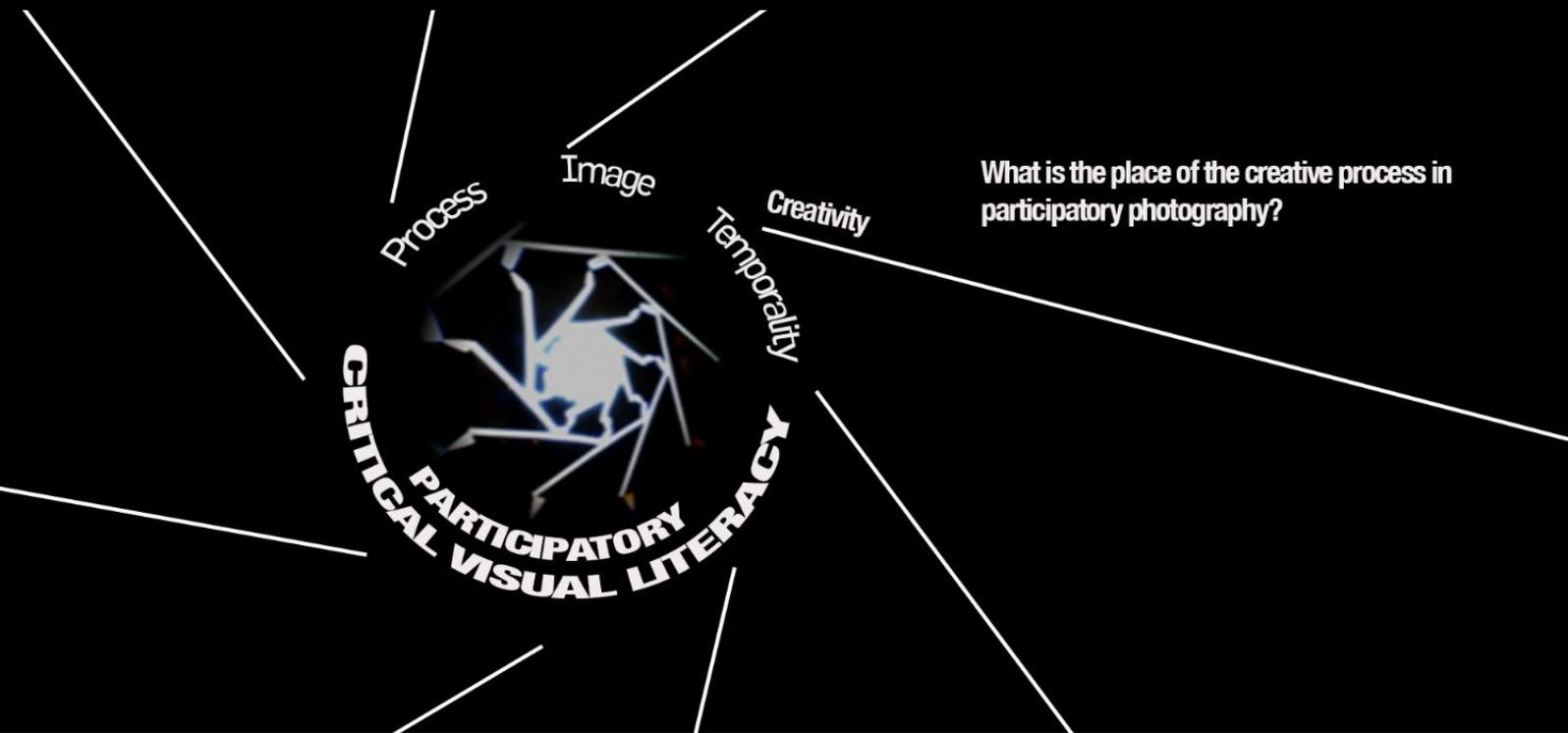
Chung and Newfield’s ideas closely align with my conceptualisation of PCVL. They draw from poststructuralist, feminist, and psychoanalytical theories to propose that new media redefine what it means to be literate and play a role in identity formation, which requires more critical approaches to visual literacy. However, despite the scarce existence of critical visual literacy as a term in educational discourse and praxis, it is not established or firmly defined and needs significant further theoretical and practical exploration. This is particularly true within practices such as participatory photography, where photographs are the key ‘texts’ that communicate the perspectives of the people they represent. While the focus on critical discussion and dialogue has been extensively examined within the participatory photography framework outlined in Chapter 1, visual literacy remains predominantly positioned within photography’s aesthetic and technical paradigms. This can undermine the role of the image as a whole and

how meaning is derived, created, and understood within this photographic process in a broader social and cultural context. PCVL places a strong emphasis on the production of visual narratives by participants, distinguishing itself from earlier iterations by focusing on self-representation and critical reflection in how participants construct and interpret their own images as a means of critical engagement and creative expression.

Participatory photography inherently aims to deal with power differentials, unconscious and conscious biases, and stereotypes of minorities and communities with no platform for expression. Therefore, applying PCVL in participatory photography settings is essential, as it prevents participants from being pushed further into their social categories when invited to act as co-researchers and engage in research projects. This was particularly true for *Who Are These Women?* where a group of unemployed young women were invited to come together within online spaces and actively engage in the production and interpretation of images on social media, as well as make decisions about the outputs and themes that subsequently began to emerge.

This research also poses critical questions related to the contextual use of technology and online engagement within participatory photography, which PCVL aimed to address in Chapter 4. Through PCVL activities, the young women were encouraged to reflect critically on their circumstances and the use of online images within the project and beyond. I, thereby, propose the Participatory Critical Visual Literacy framework, which underpins this research and is characterised as an ongoing process, marked by temporality and affected by the eight key tenets that will be explored next.

Creativity, Uncertainty and Optimal Complexity



Rather than seeking to control or steer the research process towards a predetermined telos or outcome, how might the artist-researcher cultivate an attitude of openness, receptivity towards the unplanned for, that which cannot be anticipated in advance? Indeed, how does the artist researcher prepare for the unexpected? (Cocker 2021)

The use of photography and facilitating critical discussion about images and the role they play within the creative process is an essential aspect for consideration within a participatory photography framework. Integral also to planning, delivering, and displaying the work of these participatory photography workshops, the creative process can be characterised by an uncertainty that allows for new ways of thinking, opening possibilities for unexpected innovation and providing new insights and perspectives to emerge. Within this practice-based research, the importance of creativity became evident through several experiences, which can serve as examples. The first instance was within the pilot studies, described in Appendix A. For the initial workshop series, the group consisted of photography students in their second or third year of studies. In education, the students clearly had some understanding of photography's mode of communication and had experience in the process of critically reflecting and discussing photographs. During the workshops, participants were able to engage in critical discussion with the images quickly and were able to respond to abstract photographic prompts efficiently and creatively. As a result, students produced analytical work (related to the

themes that emerged throughout the workshops) in a shorter amount of time, and the process of PCVL was able to flow without much intervention from me as a facilitator. In contrast, the second pilot group consisted of a group of young people who did not have prior photography education. The most evident difference was that participants required more time to move from literal representations to symbolic and abstract visual thinking.

A key part of the creative process within these workshops was critical discussion, which is an integral part of the PCVL model, and the introduction of deliberate intention, which included aesthetic and technical choices. More importantly, it involved making critical, subjective, and symbolic connections that extend beyond the photograph's ability to document daily life. The photograph was thereby a critical component within this creative endeavour based on the tension it provides between its status as an art form and its ability to represent reality. The dualistic nature of photography - its relationship with reality and its potential as an art form - is discussed by leading theorists and further elaborated upon by James Elkins in his edited book *Photography Theory* (2013). This divide is still visible in terms of how photographs are used within different fields, with the utilitarian⁴⁴ function of the image to document reality often being separated from its potential as an art form.

The image continues to be separated between its ability to document daily life based on its indexicality and technological potential and its status as an artwork. Consequently, the photographic image also persists as a document or evidence and acts purely as data within research. However, as Mitcheson notes "Instead of focusing on one aspect of photography at the cost of another, it is worthwhile to explore how the presence of a tension between these two sites of aesthetic interest provides a unique photographic aesthetics." (Mitcheson 2010, p.1). This tension can mostly be placed between the photograph's ability to signify the real and its subjective interpretation as a piece of art. Nevertheless, "photographic representations are codes that project an effect of the real through a process of connotation" as noted by Foster in *The Return of The Real* (1996 p. 83). Thereby, merging the representational, the subjective, and the intentional can elevate a photograph into art.

⁴⁴ Photography's battle to elevate itself from a utilitarian medium to a fully-fledged creative art form has challenged the boundaries between different art forms (Rosenblum 1997). The democratisation of photography has played a role in making art less elitist by offering a creative outlet for the masses and contributing to institutional critique within the art world. According to Walter Benjamin (1972), this shift in perception of photography as an art form necessitated a transformation of the role of art in society and imposed a re-evaluation of its purpose. As a medium, photography opened the potential for the democratisation of art in general and has contributed to the development of socially engaged art, as described in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

This persistent tension between photography's ability to function as an objective record and a subjective art form blurs the boundaries of contemporary photography's creative potential, which remains ambiguous, leaving open the question of what elevates a photograph to an artwork beyond a document or snapshot. One possible answer could be its positionality, context, and intended meaning, which is then validated within an artistic framework. An example of this is the autobiographical work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* by Nan Goldin, which aesthetically resembles the ubiquitous snapshot within social media, she comments on this in an interview by the New York Times titled "Nan Goldin Wants You to Know She Didn't Invent Instagram" - "I'm not responsible for anything like social media, am I?" (cited in Mcdermon 2016). However, at the time of the production of these images in the 1980s, they were important as they intentionally revealed aspects of life that usually remained hidden. Therefore, a photograph can become a work of art when it goes beyond being a representation of reality and becomes a means of expressing ideas, emotions, and experiences through deliberate intention that provides something novel. This can occur when a photograph employs technical or formal innovations to generate new visual expressions or when it addresses broader social or political issues in a manner that is both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating. As Suzanne Lacy points out, "...art becomes one's statement of values as well as a reflection of a mode of seeing." (Lacy 1995, p.46). In essence, this means that any photograph, regardless of its purpose or aesthetic attributes, can be seen as part of a creative endeavour if it has been produced with a deliberate and critical intention and endorsed within an artistic framework (a consideration I explore further in Chapter 4).

Another example of the photograph shifting between different photographic domains is the passport photograph. It has a utilitarian meaning with no creative purpose. These portraits exist to serve as evidence of one's identity. However, if we explore the work of Thomas Ruff in his body of work, *Portraits*⁴⁵, we can see that the function and aesthetic of the passport photo can also become a work of art. The reappropriation and shift of purpose through intent is not a new idea within art, as highlighted in Duchamp's 'readymades' (see footnote 18). The increasing importance of intent can be seen throughout postmodernism. Thus, critical reflexivity, intent and purpose, rather than purely aesthetics, are consistent with understanding a contemporary creative process. Furthermore, it could be argued that a photograph becomes a work of art when it engages with broader social, cultural, or political issues, inviting critical reflection and interpretation. Deliberate and critical engagement with the image and its position within the

⁴⁵ The project can be seen on the artist's website <https://www.thomasruff.com/werke/portrats/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

world can elevate a photograph from a mere document of reality to a work of art. In this way, the production of any image can be viewed as a creative practice through the process of critical reflection at the point of meaning-making and deliberate interpretation. This is particularly applicable to participatory and collaborative photography, which involves deliberate reflection and creative intervention in the world. Participants in this project made choices, which included framing, developing, and discussing ideas, composition, and timing, which are all part of this creative process. The intentional and critical approach to image making and dissemination illustrates how creativity played an important role within the PCVL reciprocal structure

Considering photography as a creative process, it is important to note that this extends beyond the production of images. As a mindset, creativity requires a balance between careful consideration and open and non-predetermined thinking, as well as embracing uncertainty. The planning and designing of the *Who Are These Women?* workshops, prompts and curriculum not only required creativity in their conception and delivery but were specifically designed to encourage a creative state of what I have termed as 'optimal complexity'⁴⁶. Taking into consideration the participant's abilities, prior knowledge, and personal circumstances, whereby finding an optimal balance was crucial when working with participants dealing with complex issues, who could find some prompts and discussions challenging. Therefore, the photographic prompts were designed to be less specific and open-ended, allowing a 'creative freedom' for each participant to share or express as little or as much as they feel comfortable to do so. The photography prompts and discussion within *Who Are These Women?* were organised around three distinct themes and areas:

- A day in their life - focusing on what they like to do in their daily life and how it may resonate best with the theme of female identity.
- Two photos you would normally not upload to social media – This resonated with the theme of image sharing and social media
- 5 keywords and a photograph for each - based on the discussion on women, hidden labour and social barriers to employment – resonating with the theme of precarity and barriers to employment.

One research participant noted in the feedback form: "It [the workshops] allowed me to think outside of the box to create images relating to words and prompts". The structure also involved

⁴⁶ Optimal complexity is term I have appropriating computational complexity theory. I have chosen to use it to describe how it operates within the design, planning, delivery, editing and dissemination stages of this project. In the context of creativity and participatory photography, optimal complexity is intended to be a reference of finding the right balance when designing and engaging participants between novelty and familiarity, where they are challenged enough to critically explore new ideas and push their boundaries but not so much that they become overwhelmed and unable to effectively produce and conceptualise the meaning of their outputs.

moving slowly from literal and open-ended photographic prompts to more complex and abstract visual representations, which included expression of feelings and visual symbolic representations of ideas.

Embracing creative uncertainty was also evident in the process of running the workshops within this project, where planning oscillated between providing a coherent structure and leaving space for the unexpected. By being responsive and participant-led, the workshop plans were required to change and adapt in response to the course of actions taken by participants within the session. Retaining the capacity for unpredictability is an essential and necessary part of participatory photography, as well as the creative process. The young women who took part in this research started by deconstructing their photographs and then reconstructing them into something new. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi notes that “the power to create has always been linked with the power to destroy” (1996, p.320). He discusses the importance of uncertainty and risk-taking in his exploration of creativity. Creativity involves a delicate balance between order and chaos, as well as moving into the unknown, embracing ambiguity and taking risks. This was a significant consideration when planning this project, as uncertainty can manifest in several ways and cuts across many areas, including the planning, the process of the workshops and the outputs. However, it is within this uncertainty that the most significant value can be found, as it often generates new and unexpected outcomes.

Creativity and the uncertainty that often comes with it, played an important part in generating unexpected outcomes within *Who Are These Women?*. The workshops entailed an imaginative exploration of new perceptions, which can be seen in the online exhibition and will be elaborated on in Chapter 3. In this way, this research utilised artistic methods and creativity to come up with fresh understandings and questioned conventional beliefs about gender and the role of women. The work of Sarah Pink (2013) on visual ethnography and the use of images in research highlights the meaningful role that creativity can play in coming up with unique perspectives and developing empathy in order to understand the human experience. Researchers can expand the boundaries of knowledge by utilising creative methods of image-making that can allow for greater inclusivity.

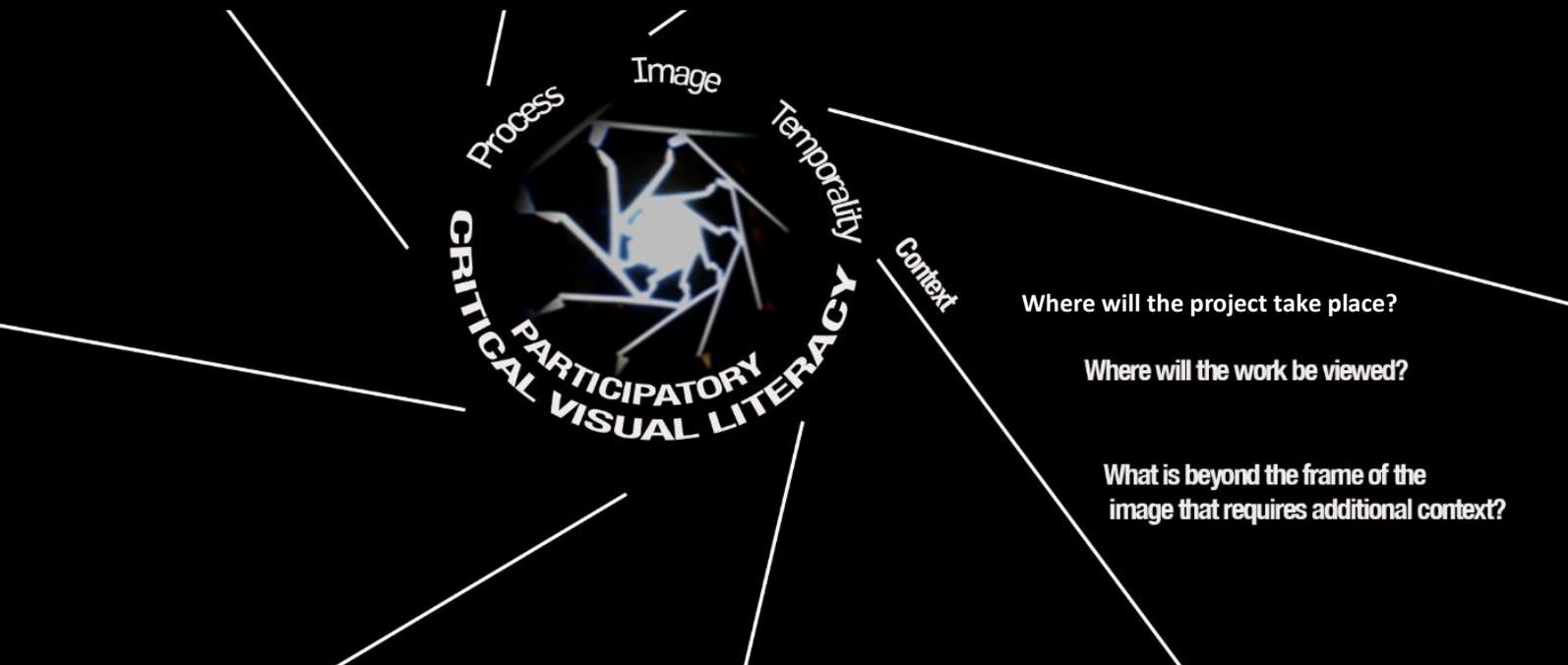
At the same time, Claire Bishop (2012) contends that in some cases, the emphasis on social issues in participatory art becomes so intense that it may outweigh the value of the artwork. This can lead to extractive visual work, which may focus on data and documentation prioritisation rather than artistic merit. Although she recognises that there is a need to address social and political problems, such aspects should, however, be taken into artistic

consideration. Within the project, maintaining the balance between an ethical and reflective critical approach while fostering creativity has been paramount and is expounded through the PCVL model.

Creativity played a central role in the intentional decision-making within *Who Are These Women?* and the development of the PCVL model. Participants were encouraged to critically reflect on their creative choices, not in isolation, but through an ongoing dialogue with the group. Individual creative decisions were shaped by collective feedback and extended beyond the moment of image production. The creative process also continued into the final stages of selection and editing, encompassing the curation of image sequences, the spatial relationships between photographs, and their size, layout, and interaction within the broader context of the work. This process culminates in a final and cohesive body of work for each participant, where each participant has ownership of their decisions throughout the process.

Consequently, as a participatory practice, the final outputs and interpretations must also consider the context of the workshops, as well as the cultural and social setting, along with the group dynamic, which significantly shape how the participatory photography process unfolds, including how images are produced, discussed, and understood. The complexity of how images communicate and their affective dimensions requires a more nuanced analysis that may be lost in abstracted data outputs, which can subsequently disregard the agency of the photographs themselves, their cultural and social site of production and dissemination and the creative process that shaped them. As Csikszentmihalyi notes, “creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context” (1996, p.23). Therefore, the context within which this creative process unfolds and how it influences the decisions, critical reflections and the subsequent outputs will be given consideration next.

Context



Due to the lessons learned from the pilot study, *Who Are These Women?* was intended to be established with some minor adjustments, utilising a combination of in-person workshops, social media platforms, and mobile phones. However, as I began planning the workshops at the beginning of 2020, the world was struck by a global COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a complete rethinking of the methodology within the new context of online networked spaces. Participatory photography is heavily reliant on interactive activities and the relationship-based aspects of human interactions. Therefore, its existence within a new digital framework was unprecedented and required significant adjustments, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. However, from the new recruitment processes, partnerships, delivery plans and ways of exhibiting the work, it must also be recognised that each participatory photography project comes with its own contextual framework, which can significantly impact its processes and outcomes.

The idea of context and situatedness is particularly relevant to socially engaged art and participatory photography. Lacy's book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995) offers an overview of discourse regarding some of the critical components of site-specificity in socially engaged public art. Focusing on the importance of context and site-specificity in how connections are made within communities, how social issues are tackled, and how conventional

art practices are disrupted. Lacy highlights that "...the artwork must be seen with respect to that vision and assessed in part by its relationship to the collective social proposition to which it subscribes." (1995, p.46). Socially engaged art always exists within a specific context that needs to be considered during a project's planning, delivery, and dissemination phases. Expanding on this, Grant Kester explores the idea of art as a tool for communication and emphasises the crucial role of context in facilitating these exchanges in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2013). He argues that socially engaged practices can enable relevant dialogues, encourage community engagement, and respond to individual needs through the collaborations made between artists and participants. Collaborative engagement, therefore, has the potential to disrupt traditional ideas of authorship and challenge power discrepancies by prioritising individual perspectives within a specific context.

An example of how context can challenge power dynamics within an institutional context was seen during the second pilot workshop of this research. The workshop included five participants between the ages of 17 and 19 who were in receipt of social services support and not in full-time education or employment. They were invited to attend the workshop within the university, where their work was subsequently exhibited as part of the SummerLodge artist residency. For some of these participants, going to university was not something they had previously considered as an option. The context of the university with this specific group of participants indirectly questioned access to and exclusion from education, as well as how institutions act as gatekeepers of these spaces. In contrast, the group of students that participated in the pilot workshops also attended the sessions within the university, the context of the workshops in this instance, reinforced power differentials as the dynamic of student and educator was reinforced through the setting of the university, which further assumed their role as mere students, and some of them inadvertently would have felt unable to fully express their opinions freely.

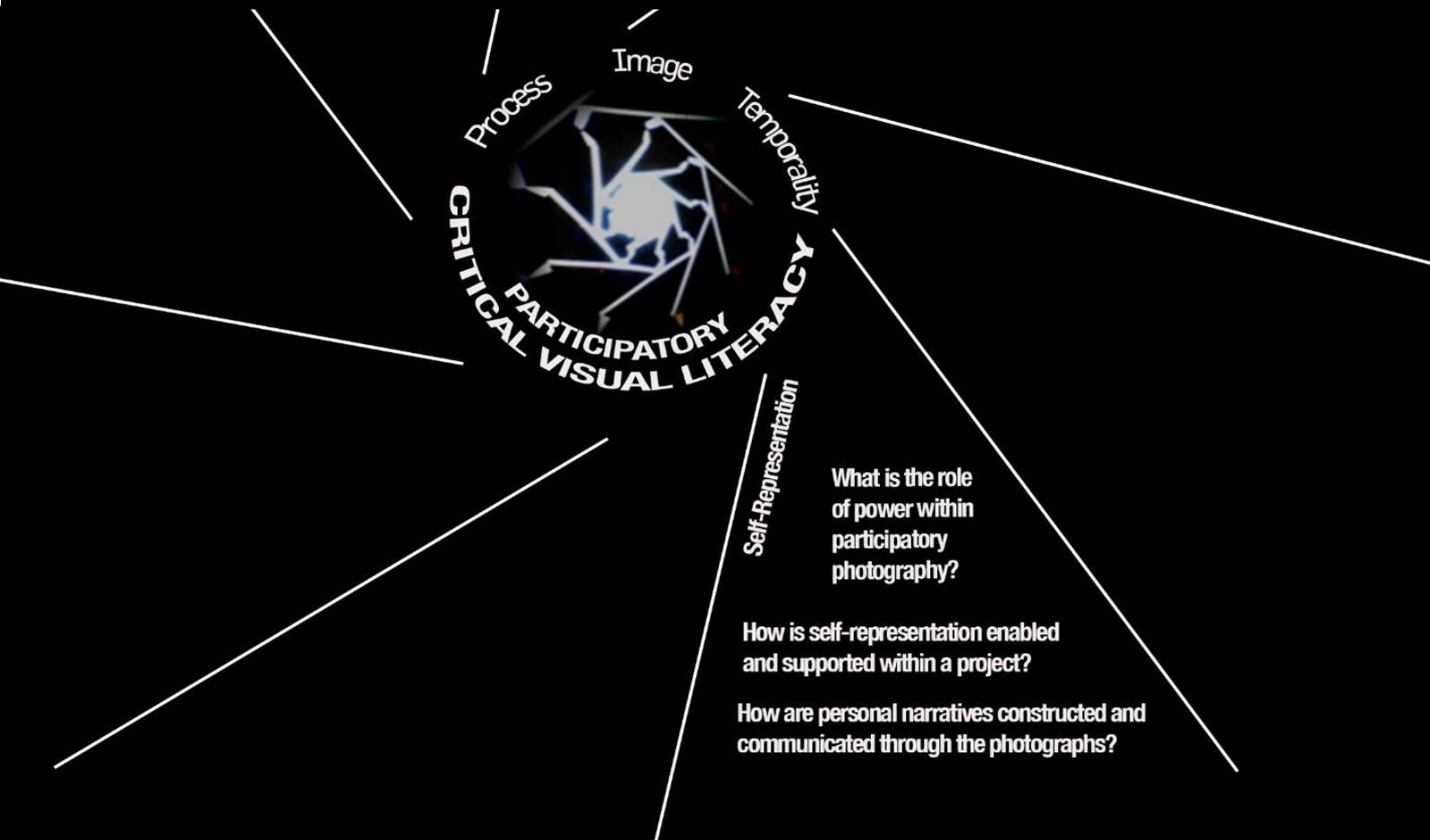
Similarly, the online delivery and recruitment via Instagram for the final project *Who Are These Women?* also raised considerations around digital exclusion, which I discuss further in Chapter 4. Pablo Helguera (2011) encourages viewers, artists, and institutions to have a critical approach towards context and to consider the social, political, and cultural factors that influence the interpretation and perception of socially engaged art. Therefore, the setting and the people that make it up are really important aspects that contribute to questioning contextual frameworks and addressing the unique experiences that these create, which are only relevant to that specific project and its outputs. Situatedness – shaped by both the space

and people within it - can be precisely what fosters a sense of identity and belonging at the start of a collaborative process.

Photographs are always mediated by their context and understood within a specific environment, which plays a significant role in meaning-making. A photograph's meaning is determined not only in terms of its production and contextual setting but also by its relationship to other photographs and texts. John Walker explores this idea and meaning making in relation to the context in his article "Context as a Determinant of Photographic Meaning" (1997), where he suggests that interpretation is not just about what is depicted in the photography but where it is viewed and how it is positioned within a specific context. A project exhibited within a university setting, like in the instance of the pilot workshops, could be received very differently within a non-educational setting. Therefore, photographs inherently also need to be critically examined and understood through their temporal context of production and presentation within a cultural setting and any subsequent exhibition mediated by a specific space.

Subject to the conditions of the pandemic, the online exhibition for *Who Are These Women?* was limited to a specific incorporeal spatial context that was inevitably altered from the in-person engagement anticipated at the outset. The online exhibition resulted in a particular type of connection between the individuals within it and my subsequent understanding of the project that would not have been realised otherwise. Consequently, critically considering the context in all its manifestations within participatory photography is essential. This includes how participatory photography projects are organised, set up and subsequently interpreted and received by their audiences. The context of a project is determined not only by its space in time but also by the interactions and the type of people that constitute it. Re-orientated to remote interactions, *Who Are These Women?* resulted in a very different process and output due to the way people were recruited, as well as the delivery of the workshop and exhibition that took place in an online networked context. Therefore, it is also essential to consider the project's workshop context, where the work is subsequently placed, and how it interacts with that specific environment and the people within it.

Self-Representation



Self-representation within *Who Are These Women?* was of critical importance due to its self-referential nature. The question that constitutes the project title and the work itself directly addresses issues of self-representation and commodification of the image, with the project further questioning how these relate to young women and function within a networked space. I address these questions through the work produced by the young women in Chapter 3.

As stated in Chapter 1, representation is an integral theme within photography, and within theoretical discourse, it is situated at the core of the power discrepancies that participatory photography aims to address, examining the dynamic between subject and object - the one being looked at and the one that is doing the looking. This dynamic also applies to research in visual sociology and related methods and disciplines such as visual ethnography and visual anthropology, where discourses around participatory methods aim to find more equitable and inclusive ways of conducting research. Building on the discussion of photography's complex relationship with representation, in this section, I will focus on the notion of self-

representation, its role in the process of participatory photography, and the role it played within this project.

Self-representation within participatory photography often includes participants being given cameras or using their mobile phones to respond to photographic prompts. By doing this, people who might have traditionally been subjects of the photographic gaze are enabled to control their narratives and how they are represented.⁴⁷ In this way, participants are essentially self-representing and retaining control over how their lives, experiences and identities are portrayed. The democratisation of photography through the digital image, the camera phone and the ability to share images on social media, fundamentally started to shift the dynamics of representation, and thus self-representation became prevalent within photography and new media. Self-representations could have a variety of purposes, ranging from documenting personal experiences to constructing identities for public consumption. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat provide new spaces for people to express and represent themselves, which has led to an explosion of self-representation in the form of selfies and personal snapshots. The selfie's⁴⁸ cultural significance is now evident to most.

The use of mobile phone cameras for *Who Are These Women?* was intentionally self-referential, as the project itself focuses on young women's use of photographs on social media. This made camera phones the most suitable tool for critical exploration of the medium, as a result, the initial intention was that the camera phone would be used to subvert not only the type of images that were produced but also the camera apparatus itself. Despite the invitation to use their mobile phones, the young women often opted to use other more technically advanced cameras they had access to. They regularly discussed the growing pressures on Instagram to use analogue or 'professional' polished images to receive an increased number of

⁴⁷ The choice of photographic tools implemented within these activities would depend on the risks involved for each individual project and how it relates to the project aims, as well as how equitable it would be for participants to use their personal phones and devices.

⁴⁸ Discourse on visual culture examines how self-representational practices interact with the broader social, cultural and political contexts. These discussions also explore the intersection of race, gender and class norms and the way these manifest when people represent themselves visually. Nicolas Mirzoeff, in his book *How to See the World*, offers a review of the selfie and its relationship to self-portraiture. "Because it draws on the long history of the self-portrait, it's likely that the selfie in one form or another will continue to play a role in shaping how to see people for a long time to come." (Mirzoeff 2015, p.79 ePub version). This statement asserts the importance and prevalence of the selfie as a form of self-representation within contemporary visual culture. The selfie as a term feels so naturalised, considering it was not long ago that it was initially coined. I remember when it first came out and the curiosity and commotion it instigated among the general population and, of course, within academic discourse. It entailed a full range of love or hate responses from narcissism to selfishness to self-expression and visual communication.

'likes', further exacerbating their digital labour and the potential commodification of their self-representations, as discussed in Chapter 3.

The dilemmas around the choice of camera and the quest for the most 'liked' image that young people face were also expressed through the work of Alexandra Haslam (Figure 20), a research participant who often uses analogue cameras through a labour-intensive iterative process in search of the 'perfect' image to post on Instagram. Haslam's piece "Failure, Success" highlights the anxieties around self-representation on social media and extends beyond what the image represents, but is also entangled with their modes of production, exacerbating issues around digital exclusion, which I discuss further in Chapter 4.



Figure 20 "Failure and Success" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Self-representation, in the undeniable sense, is a form of representation of the self, which can be achieved through ways that do not necessarily comply with the standard selfie or self-portrait that includes someone's face. I introduced the notion of the indirect self-portrait in a TEDx talk I gave in 2018, which presents the idea of what I referred to at the time as self(ie)-reflection. The talk proposed that any shared snapshots can be considered self-referential and thus, upon critical reflection, can be viewed as a self-representation or 'indirect portrait' of ourselves (Brailsford 2018). Katriin Tiidenberg's in her book *Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate)*

Them, also notes that a selfie does not need to include a person's face. She claims that the selfie "has the intent and legibility as a self-representation....it simply needs to be self-referential" (2018, p.39 ePub version). These images often provide information about us, our interests, our identities and what we like or dislike. Therefore, a case can be made that any snapshot that is produced and shared can be interpreted as a form of self-representation.



Figure 21 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Kate Freer (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232281> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

An example of this can be seen in Figure 21 in the work of research participant Kate Freer. Her photo on the left was intended to serve as an indirect self-portrait expressing her interest in photography and healthy food. She juxtaposed it next to her actual portrait, representing her and the idea of her aura, which can be interpreted as a reference to the portrait and its ineptness to provide identity characteristics that are beyond someone's physical appearance. At the same time, the image on the left can be seen as a way of using symbols, metaphors, signs, or literal expressions of aspects related to one's interests and, therefore, identity. In a way, an indirect self-portrait is something that can stand in for us, whether it is our face, our body or something else, and it is "...something we identify with, as it becomes something we are identified by" (Tiidenberg 2018, p.41 ePub version).

Within *Who Are These Women?* the practice and idea of self-representation through indirect self-portraits were central in that the young women were continuously engaging in the representation of themselves and their lived experiences online. Consequently, the potential for the perpetuation of stereotypes and harmful narratives is a significant critical issue within

all forms of self-representation, including participatory photography. Despite the intention of challenging dominant discourses, individuals might unknowingly reproduce harmful narratives due to the internalisation of societal norms and expectations. In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Angela McRobbie (2009) discusses how women, while attempting to create empowering narratives, can inadvertently reproduce patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes. This is particularly relevant to women in a postfeminist landscape, who are often the main targets of consumer culture and the beauty industry. These were essential themes that we discussed as part of the workshops, the outcome of which can be seen within the *Who Are This Women?* online exhibition. The positioning of their work within a broader feminist context is also reflected upon within Chapter 3.

Furthermore, through photo-dialogues (discussed in the next section), the women were able to discuss and reflect on representations of women through a range of images taken from the internet, informing the production of 'counter-visual narratives'. In the context of social media, 'counter-visual narratives' can be viewed as self-representational images and other visual content that challenge stereotypes and represent marginalised identities that are usually ignored or misrepresented in mainstream media. Consequently, photography and its tools are complicit in the process of representation, and it is important to note how the production and self-representation of identity can operate as both a tool for activism⁴⁹ that challenges these negative stereotypes and power hierarchies, but equally, if used inappropriately, it can also perpetuate them.

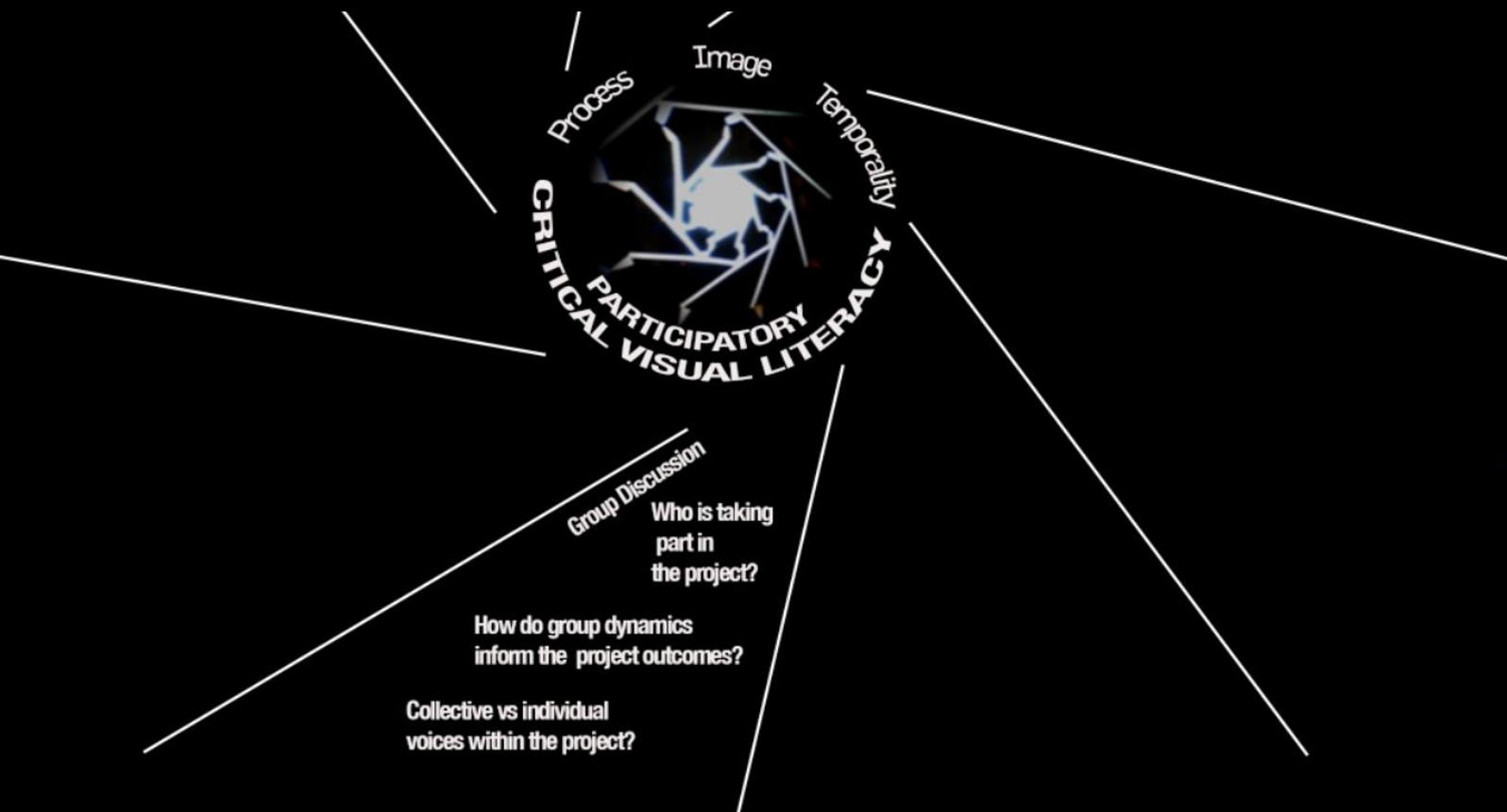
Self-representation as a way for individuals to shape and express their identities is a subject of study within many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, media studies, and visual culture. However, understanding the practice of self-representation within new media and the role of images to also potentially perpetuate stereotypes of inequality is important in the process of self-representation and the practices, like participatory photography, which aim to resist this. Nicholas Mirzoeff affirms that "Visual culture involves the things that we see, the

⁴⁹ According to bell hooks (2015a) the significance of marginalised groups representing themselves lies in acknowledging the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender systems of oppression. To challenge mainstream media representations, she coined the term "oppositional gaze". Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) discusses the idea of "countervisuality" as a form of resistance to dominant visual narratives but allowing for the portrayal of more inclusive and diverse representations of identities. Furthermore, visual resistance and activism through self-representation utilising new media can be viewed as a broad contribution to 'participatory culture' as framed by Jenkins, Ito and boyd (2015). According to their proposal, individuals are not merely passive consumers of media. Instead, they are actively involved in generating visual content that has the potential to challenge the stereotypes and inequalities that are perpetuated by consumer culture and the attention economy. User-generated images can be a powerful way to counter mainstream stories because it allows users to exercise some influence, rather than everything being controlled by corporations.

mental model we all have of how to see, and what we can do as a result...” (Mirzoeff 2015, p.26 ePub version). Rather than perpetuating visual tropes and pushing people further into their categories through the images that are created, it is essential to consider how visual culture shapes our sense of self and how practices like participatory photography can resist or counter this in a critical and reflective way.

To conclude, while self-representation within participatory photography and Participatory Critical Visual Literacy seeks to address some of the ethical considerations and traditional power discrepancies, criticisms of photographic representation are not without their own limitations. While participatory photography and PCVL seek to provide a more equitable approach, they are still not fully able to address all of these ethical considerations, which I will explore in more detail in Chapter 4. A level of critical reflection and reflexivity by the facilitator and group members through group discussions can make some of these dynamics visible, as well as challenge any potentially harmful or reinforcing representations.

Group Discussion and Collaboration



"I feel like the conversation really brought the images to life and getting the chance to discuss ideas and what everyone brought to the table was inherently interesting and with lots to learn."

By Research Participant from Who Are These Women?

(Taken from the workshop feedback forms)

Participatory photography requires the presence of a group of people in order for a PCVL discussion to take place, which distinguishes it from other individual self-representation practices. Group workshops allow for discussions and feedback, which are essential for critical reflection on the use, production and creation of images. Through conversation, potential biases and internalised social constructs that perpetuate negative stereotypes and inequalities can be identified. The dialogic nature of participatory photography and PCVL, as previously discussed, are informed by the work of Paulo Freire⁴⁹, (who emphasises dialogue as a key element in the process of developing critical consciousness), as well as by Relational Aesthetics

and Dialogic Art⁵⁰ (that also point out the importance of discussion within socially engaged art). In this research, the coming together of the diverse perspectives of the young women operated as a catalyst for the negotiation of difference and as an effective tool in unravelling some of the unintentional biases present in dominant visual narratives of the representation of young women.

Facilitating dialogue and discussion amongst the group of participants was an essential component of the *Who Are These Women?* workshops. Group work meant that sessions were usually structured around the participants getting together and reviewing images from photographic prompts and engaging in photo dialogue activities. Sessions would usually conclude with discussions and group decision-making on the subsequent photographic assignments and planning the next steps of the process. Photo dialogues are group activities which involve a set of curated images that facilitate discussion within the group. The selection of images is usually based on a topic that is relevant to the project. Images representing women in different roles and circumstances were selected for these workshops. The concept of optimal complexity, as I propose in the creative section of this chapter, was applied to the selection of images for the photo dialogue activities. This means that the images were selected in a way that would provide enough stimulation for discussion on the topic of representation of women, but were not overly contentious, potentially causing unmanageable conflict or adverse reactions within the group. This selection of images requires undertaking a reflexive approach to the biases that a facilitator will bring to the selection process, as it will be used to guide the conversation. Therefore, critical consideration was given to the curation of the images for discussion to include diverse representations of women and to avoid introducing potential biases by me as a facilitator. Participants were then asked to organise the images based on different criteria through consensus, which meant that the negotiation of diverse perspectives would be inevitable.

⁵⁰ As discussed in Chapter 1 dialogic art, as described by Grant Kester in his book *Conversation Pieces* (Kester 2013), the artist is not the exclusive producer of meaning but rather a facilitator of discussion and engagement. The interpretation of artwork is not fixed, but rather a dynamic process that evolves through the exchange of ideas among multiple individuals. Kester argues that dialogical art can promote social and political transformation by providing platforms for critical reflection and dialogue on the matters that impact people's lives. Furthermore, Nicolas Bourriaud's (Bourriaud 1998) work on relational art and aesthetics also puts an emphasis on social interaction and human relationships as the focus of the artwork. Relational art seeks to create situations and experiences that bring people together, and it encourages the formation of new social connections and communities. Therefore, the interactions between people within a specific context are critical to the creation of socially engaged work. Encouraging dialogue and social exchange, collaborative practices aim to encourage connections between individuals, often blurring the distinction between art and everyday life. By doing so, these practices can challenge the traditional structures of power and inspire the exploration of novel ideas and viewpoints.

Another example of a photo dialogue activity within the workshops included asking each of the young women to find a positive and a negative representation of a woman on the internet. They were then asked to upload them to a collective board, as seen in Figure 22, for discussion. This allowed participants to identify and raise topics of interest to them, which might have been excluded from the ones curated in the previous iteration of the photo dialogue, and to bring them up for discussion. Through these conversations, the young women were able to reflect on their own assumptions and negotiate their perspectives with others, which would subsequently inform the themes within the creation of their own images.

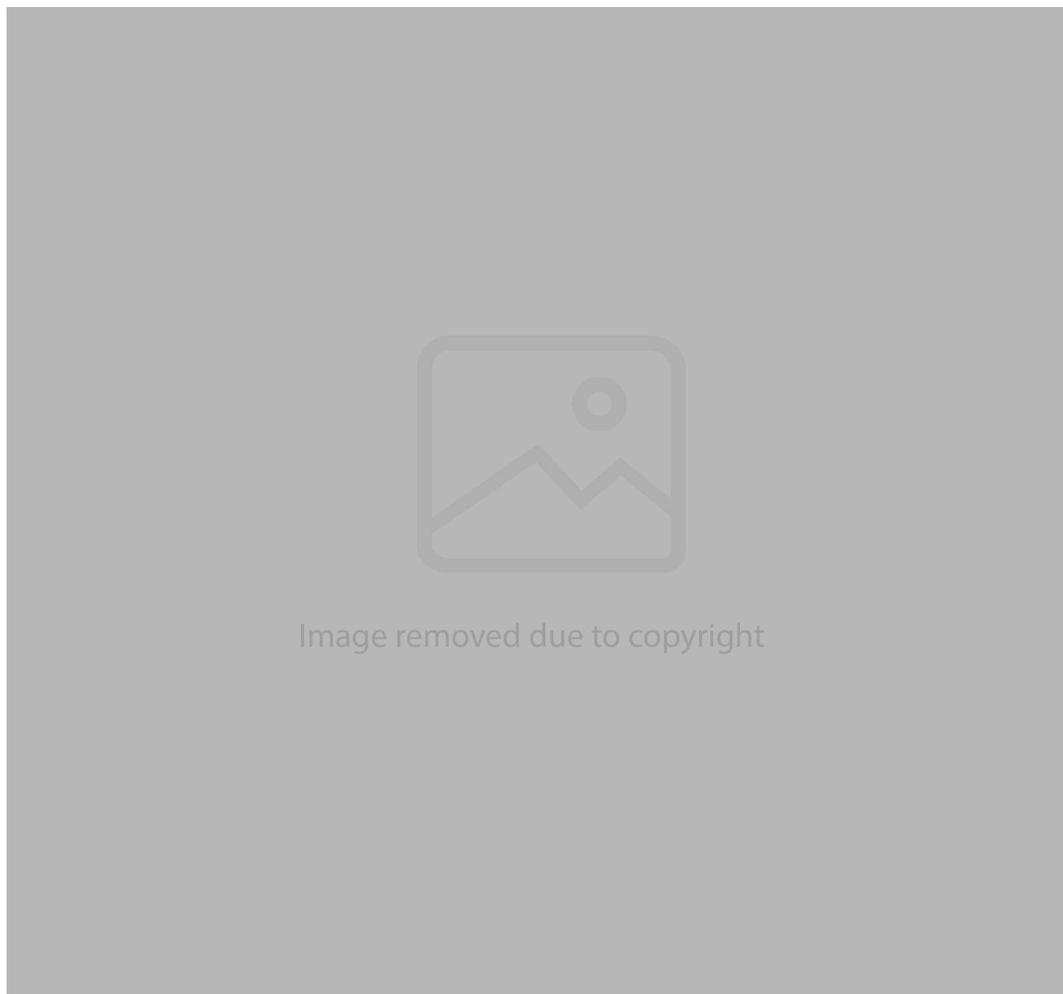


Figure 22 A screenshot of one of the photo-dialogue activities used as part of Who Are These Women? workshops, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

Photo dialogues within *Who Are These Women?* operated similarly to Paulo Freire's proposition of the culture circle and 'Conscientization' as discussed earlier in this chapter. Selecting

photographs depicting various social situations and representations of women allowed participants to ask questions, challenge stereotypes, and critically reflect on the realities they represented. Furthermore, by questioning the contexts in which the images were taken, participants started to uncover the underlying power structures, ideologies, and narratives that shape the portrayed situations, which is central to PCVL. The use of images helped them question and challenge assumptions, and unveil hidden biases and inequalities - photographs were, thereby, indispensable in the process of critical reflection and group discussion.

Understanding the indexical nature of photography and its ability to reference actual events and stories is crucial in comprehending how photographs help to stimulate conversations and promote critical reflection in participatory photography. Images have the ability to portray the world and inform how we view it, which sets photography apart from other visual mediums and reinforces its role in facilitating dialogue. Photos are distinctively interpreted by our brains, evoking a visceral response that can be potentially rooted in their perceived relationship with reality (Berman, 2019). Through this relationship, images can evoke strong emotions and serve as reflections on our own lives that foster dialogue and empathy. Their ambiguous and interpretative nature can also encourage discussions on different perspectives about culture, representation, and power, as well as reflections on our own unconscious biases, beliefs and views of the world that can come through within these conversations.

The way meaning is constructed at the point of making and viewing images is complex and defined by our knowledge, previous experiences and personal perspectives on life. By exploring and looking at each other's photographs and other representations of women, the women who took part in this project, through critical discussion, were able to question, give feedback and find commonalities and differences in their perspectives and how gender is being represented. Therefore, the photograph's interpretation is not fixed, and its ambiguity plays a critical role in facilitating discussions, which I will explore further in the interpretation section of this chapter. Furthermore, group discussions influence individual interpretations, so it is critical to view the work collectively while honouring each participant within it. Relational theories and intersubjectivity are highly applicable to the meaning-making process of PCVL in terms of the influence of the group on individual subjectivity and group dynamics. Feminist scholar Jessica Benjamin (1988) argues that individuals' sense of self is shaped by their relationships and interactions with others. This relational aspect within the workshops, at the same time, shapes the individual perspectives, as well as influences the collective through the group dynamics. Therefore, the constitution of people within the group shapes and defines the nature of the interactions, the decisions that are made, and their subsequent photographic outputs.

For *Who Are These Women?* after careful deliberation, I decided to recruit the women for this project via a call-out on Instagram. This meant being 'in partnership' with Instagram's algorithm instead of the usual collaborations with external organisations that would hold specific expertise on women's access to employment opportunities. This inevitably created a very different group and project constitution, which contributed significantly to the group dynamic and the type of people that took part in it. It was inevitable that access to the most vulnerable participants was not as effective through the Instagram recruitment process, which would have significantly altered the nature of the group and the topics of interest. The recruitment process and criteria, thereby, raised important questions of intersectionality, digital exclusion, the binary understanding of the category woman, and access to opportunities, which I elaborate on further in Chapter 4.

The group did not have collective ownership of the production and meaning of the work. Each young woman's personal narrative and interpretation of their images belong to them. It evolved through ongoing dialogue, feedback, and interaction within the group, illustrating how individual subjectivities are influenced within a collective and social context. Thereby, the group informed how meaning is created within each individual's perspective. These group workshops can be viewed as operating through a form of relational subjectivity⁵¹, which underlines the deep interconnections between personal and collective experiences. Each participant retains their personal narrative, but this narrative is not fixed. It is reshaped and recontextualised through interaction with others and the feedback received within the group setting. This interplay creates a dynamic environment where individual perspectives and identities are in constant dialogue with the group's collective dynamic and interpretation. The relational approach allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and intersectionality, ensuring that everyone's views are considered and included.

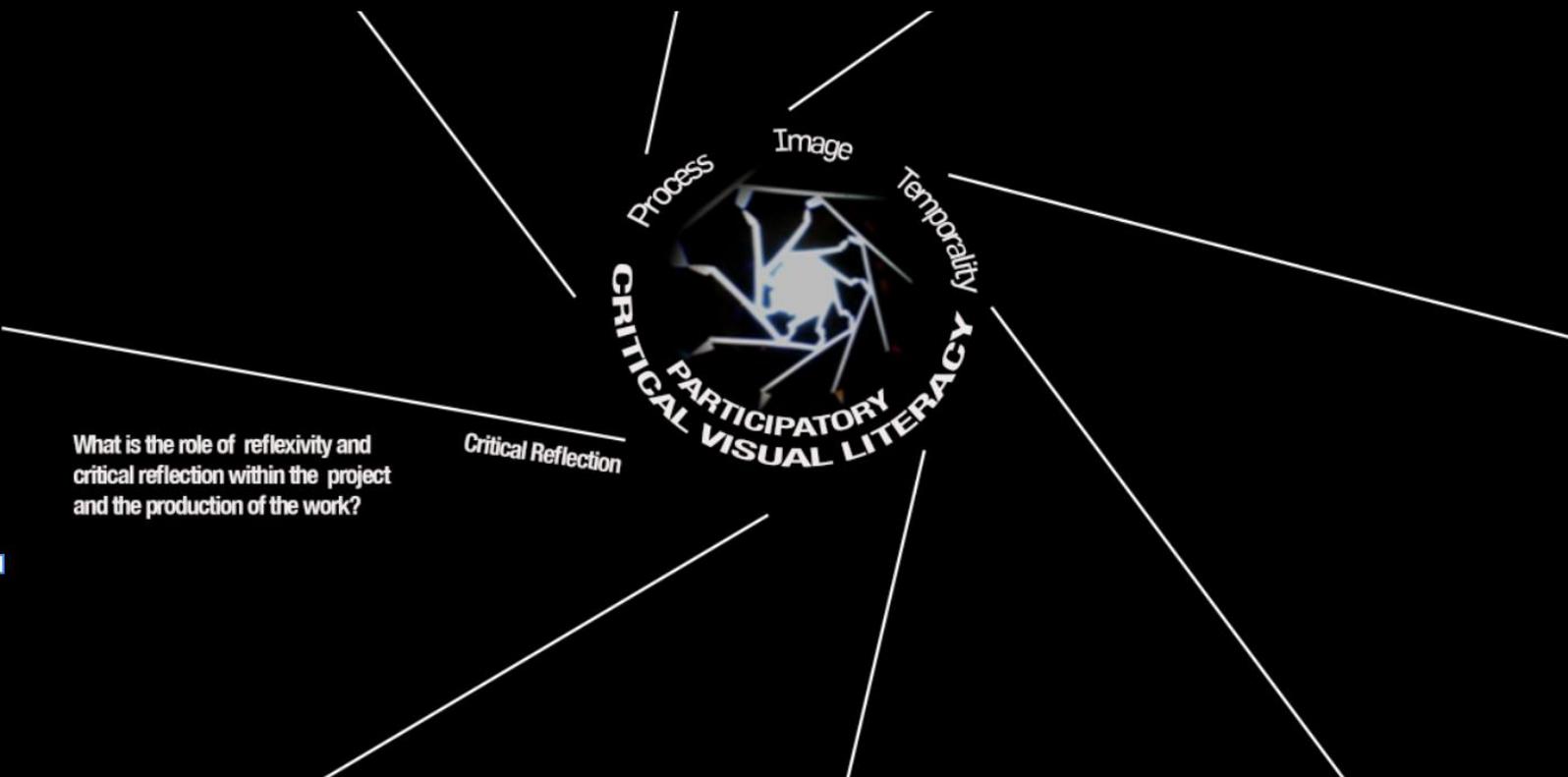
Within the exhibition of *Who Are These Women?* the work produced by each individual forms a collective piece that constitutes the final exhibition. This is where the idea of the reciprocal structure is fundamental, as it portrays the concept of the collective being shaped by the sum of its individual components that ultimately create and support the structure. In contrast, the risk of producing the work as a collective interpretation can inevitably lead to the

⁵¹ "In other words, community-based art practices create alternative socio-political structures that allow people to relate to one another and their environment differently, which implies, in the cases that follow, a turn from an individualist model and towards one of relational subjectivity." (Davis 2011, p.7) "elaborated from the philosophical tradition of radical empiricism that argues for ontology as processual and relational.

homogenisation of views, in that some perspectives will inadvertently not be represented within the final outputs. Additionally, group dynamics, facilitation and power play a significant role in the engagement and workshop process, undoubtedly influencing the project outputs. Understanding these potential influences and undercurrents is essential in producing the final outputs and facilitating the workshops, which are expanded on in Chapter 4.

While group work, discussion and decision making were central to this process, it is useful to acknowledge that they were shaped through the process of deliberate critical reflection. Critical reflection and reflexivity within group settings are essential to the PCVL process. Through collective interpretation and conversation, the process of dialogue and the exchange and multiplicity of perspectives and ideas can make critical thinking most effective in the framework of participatory photography.

Critical Reflection



Through reflection, group discussion, and critical thinking, participants were able to identify flaws or inconsistencies in their reasoning and find ways to address them through the work they were aiming to produce. As part of this research practice, which aimed to challenge norms and represent the identities and lived experiences of the participants, it was essential to produce photographic work in a way that is based on meaningful reflective and critical consideration. The reflective process also extends to considering the context of production and the power dynamics at play within it.

The 'reflexive turn'⁵² and the crisis of representation started questioning the notion of objectivity and neutrality within the social sciences. The shift towards reflexivity was characterised by an increased emphasis on the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge and a call for critical reflection on the assumptions, values, and biases that researchers bring to their work. PCVL calls for an engagement with ethnographic research and the importance of reflexivity. This would apply to both the facilitator and the participants, who are co-researchers or collaborators in the analysis and production of meaning within the

⁵² The 'reflexive turn' can broadly be characterised by scholars "...drawing on the use of the self to generate insights, establish patterns, and bring the voice of their research subjects to light" (Venkatesh 2013).

research process. Furthermore, Sarah Pink (2006, p.22) discusses the role of reflexivity within visual anthropology and suggests that it is not just about collecting visual data but also about understanding how visibility is part of the culture being studied. She argues that visual ethnographers need to critically reflect on how they use visual methods and interpret visual data. This could involve considering how their own perspectives and interpretations might be influencing the research process and how power dynamics might affect what is being visually represented and, more importantly, how.

The participants of *Who Are These Women?* were also invited to engage in self-reflection, which can be considered a form of visual autoethnography⁵³. They were encouraged to reflect within the group through the discussion and production of images on their lived experiences, circumstances and identities in order to make sense of the broader cultural and social conditions in which they exist. Kim Etherington discusses in “Becoming a Reflexive Researcher” the importance of and the meaning of reflexivity, where she notes “reflexivity recognises a circulating energy between context of researcher and researched and that both have agency” (2004, p.47). Furthermore, Etherington discusses the value of using ourselves within research. This kind of self-reflection in research can lead to a better understanding of how knowledge exists and a level of transparency in the assumptions that are made around it. As co-researchers, it was essential that the young women were also encouraged to engage in reflexivity and, therefore, analysis within the research process and the production of meaning both within the process and the outputs. This usually took place in the form of personal reflections that were informed by the group discussions and feedback on the shared images.

The young women were invited to pay attention to the limitations and potential pitfalls of self-representation on social media and as a whole. Self(ie) reflections, as I termed this process of reflection in my TEDx talk discussed earlier, of the created images, aimed for the women to reflect on their images and what they might conform to within the process of production. Jill Walker Rettberg's book *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (2014) warns of the potential risks and downsides of digital self-representation. She discusses concerns about privacy, data security, and the pressure to present a curated, idealised version of oneself online. Therefore, online self-representations may end up unwillingly conforming to specific aesthetic standards and inadvertently reinforcing harmful stereotypes. These images also have the potential to lead to

⁵³ Autoethnography is an approach to research, which involves the systematic analysis and description of personal experiences (auto) to gain insight into cultural experiences (ethnography) (Ellis et al. 2011, p.273).

self-exploitation, create echo chambers, and contribute to digital labour and exploitation, thus leading to precarity, which I discussed previously in this chapter in the section on self-representation and in further detail in Chapter 3. An example of the process of critical reflection can be seen in the work of Kate Freer (research participant) in Figure 23, where she directly portrays her self-reflection thought process as part of the image caption. She does this by engaging in a conversation with herself that expresses her personal dilemma regarding an image she had previously intended to share on social media.



Figure 23 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Kate Freer (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232281> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Consequently, the act of self-representation may be problematic if it does not include critical reflection and discursive action, where critical interpretation and group feedback through discussion can act as a mechanism for regulation. In this way, PCVL created a space for reflection and discussion of the unconscious biases and internalised power structure that may be present within the images that were created through the critical reflection group discussions.

The concept of slow looking⁵⁴ was a helpful mechanism for the group to engage in critical discussion of their images and those of others. As part of the critical reflection and observation process, the idea of slowing down and deliberately engaging with the details of an image and what it evokes in terms of emotional and thought processes can be an essential aspect of critical thinking and reflexivity. As one participant from *Who Are These Women?* notes in terms of what they liked most in the feedback form: “Reflection and discussion during workshops and seeing my work in an exhibition space (even if it is only digital)”. I often encouraged the group to look at a single image and discuss its visual details and their responses to it. Participants were encouraged to apply this to their own images and those of the other members of the group to gain a deeper understanding of their responses and the meaning of their photographs.

Slowing down through reflection, when looking can also engage the process of recognising and engaging with one’s embodied responses, one can become more aware of the ways in which their affective experiences shape their subjective experiences and perceptions of the visual. It can involve a process of introspection and self-reflection, where one attends to their bodily sensations and affective responses, acknowledging the impact they have on their lived experiences. By acknowledging the affective and embodied dimensions of subjectivity, participants open up to the possibilities of engaging in self-reflection and critically examining the affective forces that shape their identities and potentially challenge or redefine them through their created images. Consequently, exploring and bringing to awareness the visual details of the image, as well as the affective and embodied responses that emerge through the process of slowing down in relation to a photograph, can reveal the gap or excess that exists between the image and its symbolic representation. This gap emerges through affective and embodied encounters with the photograph that can potentially disrupt the seamless visual narrative presented by the image and thus provide a deeper understanding of the photograph’s

⁵⁴ Observation is a central theme within ethnography and visual ethnography, which is inherently linked to the idea of visibility and the idea of looking. Shari Tishman, in her book *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation* (2017), talks about the importance of slowing down to engage in a contemplative form of looking. To fully engage in the practice of slow looking, it’s crucial to adopt an inquisitive and mindful mindset when encountering visual stimuli. This entails consciously directing your attention to the finer details and subtleties of the experience of the visual stimulation, allowing yourself to be fully present and gain a profound comprehension and appreciation of what you’re observing. By engaging with a slow looking approach, one can enhance their ability to reflect on, perceive and interpret visual information and thus engage in the process of PCVL. Furthermore, slow looking is even more pertinent in a world that is currently saturated with images where we might be experiencing looking and visual stimulation fatigue or desensitisation. By slowing down, people can engage in deliberate and focused observation of the visual, typically done at a slower pace than our usual hurried glances and have the necessary time to connect and reflect upon their emotional responses. It involves examining details, patterns, and nuances in what we see, allowing for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the visual subject.

visual and affective dimensions. I propose the use of the questions in Figure 25 as a guide to facilitate this process of reflection.

Overall, the purpose of reflexivity within PCVL is to enable individuals to develop a critical self-awareness of their beliefs, values, and identities and to evaluate how they apply these to the work they produce. Images are inherently ambiguous, and their meaning is fluid and not fixed, dependent on the context they were produced in, the intention of the photographer and the way audiences bring their prior knowledge, personal experience and culture to the reading. Therefore, how photographs are analysed and how their meaning is constructed, both at the point of creation and consumption, is central to PCVL.

Useful Participatory Critical Visual Literacy Questions:

1. What can you see?

List all the details? What is happening in the image?

Contemplation of the Image – what are the facts of the image? This can be closely related to visuality, slow looking and contemplating and ‘seeing’.

2. What are you feeling?

Emotional response to the image – bringing to awareness the ‘affect’ of the image and looking for potential subconscious and embodied responses.

3. What does what you are seeing and feeling make you think?

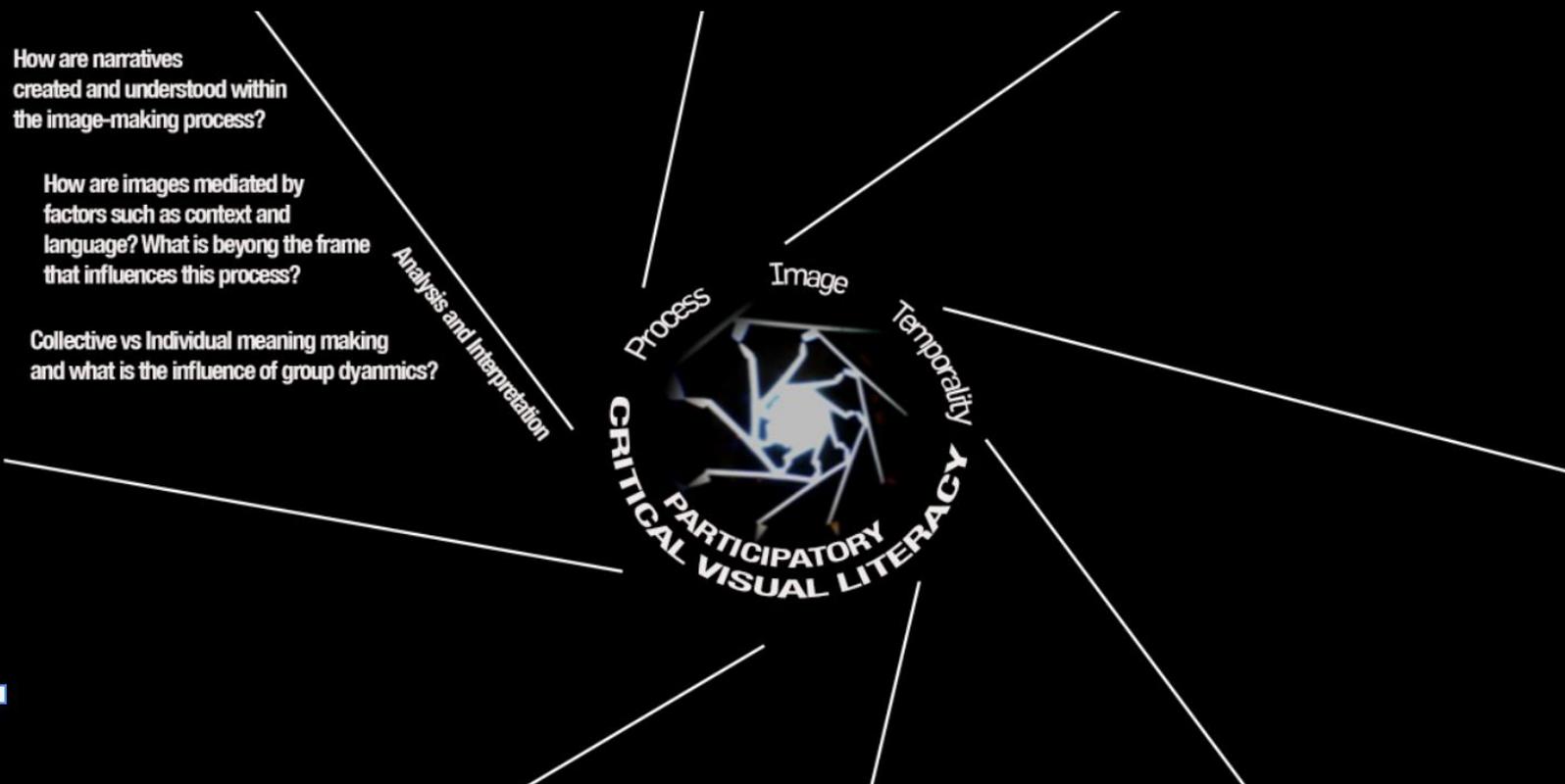
Are my thoughts and assumptions personal, cultural or universal? - Critically rationalising the image – Collaborative analysis of the individual responses through discussion. Relational aspects (aesthetics, dialogue, subjectivity, collective meaning-making).

Additional questions to consider:

How does the image communicate? What are the potential visual elements that are present to create these responses?

How can I distil and capture the feelings, thoughts and critical reflections to communicate this through the work? Can I use words to do that in the form of a caption? Are there other ways of expressing or adding contextual information if reflective interpretation and analysis is not possible through words?

Analysis, Meaning Making and Interpretation



“Communication was definitely a big one. Thinking of the real life impacts of the people and places you photograph, especially in a political/social sense. Also just how to convey a message in maybe a less obvious way, that was the best thing I learnt.”

By Research Participant from Who Are These Women?

(Taken from the workshop feedback forms)

(con)Text and Images

An image captures a particular moment, expression and emotional state of being or subject and freezes it in time, making it available for interpretation, engagement and creative expression; therefore, the photograph can serve as a container of narratives and meaning. The analysis and meaning attributed to a photograph are not inherent but highly subjective and shaped by cultural, social and contextual factors. Therefore, the meaning of an image becomes a point of negotiation between its producer and its viewer within a specific context. The role of language in the analysis process of the signs, signifiers and affects of the image can be significant in mediating these two points of interpretation; words can, therefore, serve to capture and communicate personal meaning in conjunction with the photograph.

There is limited information on the process of image analysis and communicating the context present beyond the photograph, as well as the development of narrative and image editing within the participatory photography research framework. It is a regular occurrence that the image is used as data and, therefore, as a crutch for discussion, to provide additional context, and to assist the use of language within social sciences research. Once it has served its purpose, the image is rendered void. Researchers often misunderstand it as having fixed meanings, thus serving as evidence within the analysis process. This is particularly relevant when researchers attempt to analyse the images alone beyond the participant engagement. Images can no longer be viewed as having fixed meaning and serve as objective evidence⁵⁵. Due to the ambiguous nature of the photograph, it can be problematic to analyse the images without the participants' involvement, because it can lead to appropriation and misinterpretation that can significantly depart from their original intended meaning.

Misinterpretation can also occur within the exhibition process, where artists create new visual connections beyond the workshops through the curatorial and editorial processes. Therefore, the meaning of the photographs produced is also determined by their positionality within space and time, both within their production and consumption. In his text "Context and Determinant

⁵⁵ The photograph, as fixed in meaning to serve as evidence, has been contested within the photographic theory. The image's function and interpretation have shifted from its objective relationship with truth to a subjective post-photography paradigm and understanding of the photograph as ambiguous and open to interpretation. Within contemporary photographic discourse, images are understood to shape reality rather than solely represent it. In Allan Sekula's text *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*, he asserts:

Quite regularly, we are informed that the photograph 'has its own language', is 'beyond speech', is a message of 'universal significance' - in short, that photography is a universal and independent language or sign system. Implicit in this argument is the quasi-formalist notion that the photograph derives its semantic properties from conditions that reside within the image itself. But if we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship, then we can no longer ascribe an intrinsic or universal meaning to the photographic image. (1982, p.86)

Sekula's statement notes the shift within photography and its understanding of the image containing an innate meaning. It no longer holds its revered status of truth and evidence that can be read and reduced to a universal language. Thereby, meaning is fluid, subjective, and multifaceted, dependent on cultural, social, and personal factors that often reside beyond what is being seen within the frame of the photograph. This shift can also be observed within the work of Roland Barthes, whose ideas start to depart from his initial structuralist understanding of the photograph that belongs to a semiotic structure consisting of symbols with fixed connotation and denotation to an understanding that is more aligned with poststructuralist thought, incorporating a highly subjective interpretation through his proposition of the 'punctum'. In his seminal text *Camera Lucida* (1981), he introduces the concept of the 'Studium' and the 'Punctum'. The 'Studium' is reminiscent of the semiotic structure because it involves interpreting signs based on cultural codes and conventions. It incorporates the cultural, political, and social meanings that can be read from a photograph. Its subjective interpretation is, in a way, dependent on the viewer's knowledge, cultural background and prior experiences of the world. However, the proposition of the 'Studium' suggests that there is a potential to trace some collective and fixed meanings within a photograph. The 'Punctum', however, is a subjective and personal response to the photograph that 'pierces' the viewer, evoking a strong emotional response. "It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence" (Barthes 1981, p.53). The punctum doesn't necessarily comply with a set of fixed cultural codes, as its meaning is individually determined by each viewer's unique subjective perspective. This personal, subjectivity of the punctum is where it starts to depart from the more fixed approach of semiotics, as it cannot be universally decoded or interpreted based on shared conventions. While photography and its interpretation can still in some ways pertain to a shared symbolic structure, its meaning is no longer understood as fixed.

of Photographic Meaning” (1997), John Walker emphasises that images are often mediated, and the position and context can shape and alter their interpretation. Different viewers may bring their own experiences, beliefs, and biases to the viewing process, affecting how they perceive and understand the image. This creates further ambiguity, which can be problematic within participatory photography, which aims to provide a specific subjective perspective and can leave photographs open to re-appropriation and re-interpretation through their positionality beyond the workshops. Therefore, it is also essential to explore the role of the audience in the creation of meaning and the interpretation process. Ariella Azoulay (2021) proposes three integral components to the interpretation of photographs. The photographer, as the creator of the image, holds a certain level of power and agency in shaping the representation. The subject who is being photographed contributes their presence, experiences, and identity to the image. The viewer, finally, engages with the photograph and plays a crucial role in interpreting its meaning and determining its impact. Therefore, the dissemination, audiences and reception of the work and its context are essential to the meaning making process within participatory photography.

Being critically aware of these ambiguities and understanding the tension between images, their lack of context, their interpretations, and how they function together should be a key consideration within participatory photography and what the process of PCVL aims to address. It is also essential to consider the analysis process and its implications on meaning-making and how it can be done with and by the participants during the workshops. Participants within *Who Are These Women?* were invited to analyse their own photos through group discussions and critical reflection, which shaped their subsequent narratives and captions. Part of the PCVL process involved the discussion of captions and other contextual elements that capture and ground the meaning of the photographs in a way that communicates their specific intentions and stories. Additionally, the young women participated in the decision-making of the final exhibition layout and how their work was positioned within it.

Caroline Wang, one of the founders of the photovoice methodology, proposes a method for the discussion and interpretation of images which consists of several guiding questions SHOWeD⁵⁶ (1999, p.188). While this method involves asking questions, which is a great way to

⁵⁶ SHOWeD stands for as used by Wang (1999, p.188) and originating from (Shaffer 1984, p.25)

S What do you **S**ee here?

H What is really **H**appening here?

O How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

W **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist?

e

D What can we **D**o about it?

start a conversation about the images and understand their potential meaning within the group, it does not really provide an in-depth critical analysis of the image itself and any signifiers beyond the conversational and apparent literal interpretations. This can create tension between images and words, where in research, words are often privileged over visual images. The image is merely a crutch to extract information rather than a medium that communicates and evokes meaning in its own right. This form of analysis has the potential to also end up seeking a singular and literal meaning of the image rather than utilising a multifaceted and affective interpretation that it evokes within its maker.

Affect theory offers a more fluid understanding of experience rather than a fixed one. Brian Massumi, a scholar within the field of affect theory, proposes that affective responses are not simply about the emotions we consciously recognise but also about the pre-conscious embodied reactions that precede formal emotional recognition. These automatic and visceral responses serve as the groundwork for our experience and interpretation of the world (Massumi 2002). Moreover, our affective responses are not formed in a vacuum; they are shaped by a range of contextual factors. Our cultural backgrounds, societal norms, and personal experiences all come into play when we view and respond to the world around us (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Consequently, our interpretation of a photograph can also be viewed as constantly in flux, subject to a dynamic interplay of diverse and shifting affective factors, including our fluctuating emotional landscapes based on conscious and unconscious processes.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)⁵⁷ proposes a model that seeks to develop visual literacy skills and incorporates visual interpretation's affective and subjective nature. It is predominantly used within museums and educational environments, and it offers a helpful foundation for the discussion of images. It is not specifically associated with participatory photography, but it offers a valuable framework for consideration, as it does not seek one objective meaning within the image but aims to unpack the subjectivity of the artwork. While VTS is a useful framework

⁵⁷ Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an educational approach founded on principles such as constructivism, visual literacy, artful thinking, inquiry-based learning, and a community of learners. Developed by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist, and Philip Yenawine, an art educator, VTS encourages participants to slow down, observe, interpret, and discuss visual images, fostering critical thinking and communication skills (Hailey et al. 2015). Unlike approaches seeking a single objective meaning, VTS embraces the collective and individual meanings that emerge from the dialogue, recognising that there is no definitive endpoint to the process. It allows for exploration, curiosity, and the development of multiple interpretations. However, VTS' open-ended nature also presents limitations. While the process encourages deep engagement and thoughtful analysis, it can be challenging to form an overall personal interpretation beyond the collective and specific elements within the artwork. Furthermore, the affective dimensions of the artwork may extend beyond the individual and tangible elements, evoking an elusive and embodied experience that resists clear categorisation.

to consider, it has limitations within participatory photography in that it lacks a conclusive narrative of the image, and conversations are usually left open-ended.

In contrast, some participatory photography projects focus only on developing and understanding visual literacy through photography's technical abilities. These skills can incorporate composition, aesthetics, and other technical photographic skills to support the production and creation process of photographs. While this is a crucial element of how photography communicates as a medium, it has a limitation in that it disregards the critical and narrative-based aspects of how photographs can function and communicate, which occur beyond the aesthetic qualities they encompass.

PCVL analysis adopts elements from all of these approaches into an open-ended conversational structure, which includes conscious reasoning and the image's affective, visual and aesthetic components. The PCVL model operates through a three-step process of reflection (Figure 25). The first step involves exploring and noting the visual details present within the image, as well as how it is visually constructed to utilise photography's communication and aesthetic tools. The second step is noting the affective responses in relation to the image and what is being seen. The final step is bringing awareness and reasoning to the potential conscious and unconscious thought processes that accompany these emotional responses. Finally, participants are invited to consider how to capture, incorporate and best communicate these responses within their final piece of work. In contrast to the VTS and SHOWeD models, the PCVL questions are there to be used as an aid for reflection rather than a rigid structure to be followed. I found the PCVL approach to be more appropriate within the participatory photography workshops because it allowed participants to navigate the interpretation process at their own pace and based on their specific needs without having to adhere to a uniform and strict format of interpretation.

Furthermore, the PCVL steps for discussion also aim to serve as a way for participants to reflect on and explore their own pre-conscious responses to a photograph, as well as their potential biases, and incorporate these insights into their final body of work, including captions and analyses. Interpretative responses to a photograph are shaped not only by our conscious awareness of the symbolic structure within the photograph but also by a range of affective and embodied pre-existing experiences. In addition to the therapeutic photography review in Chapter 1, Victor Burgin, in *Thinking Photography*, emphasises the role of the unconscious in the act of interpreting photographs. Burgin (1982) explores psychoanalytical Lacanian and Freudian ideas that emphasise the power of the unconscious in shaping our perceptions and

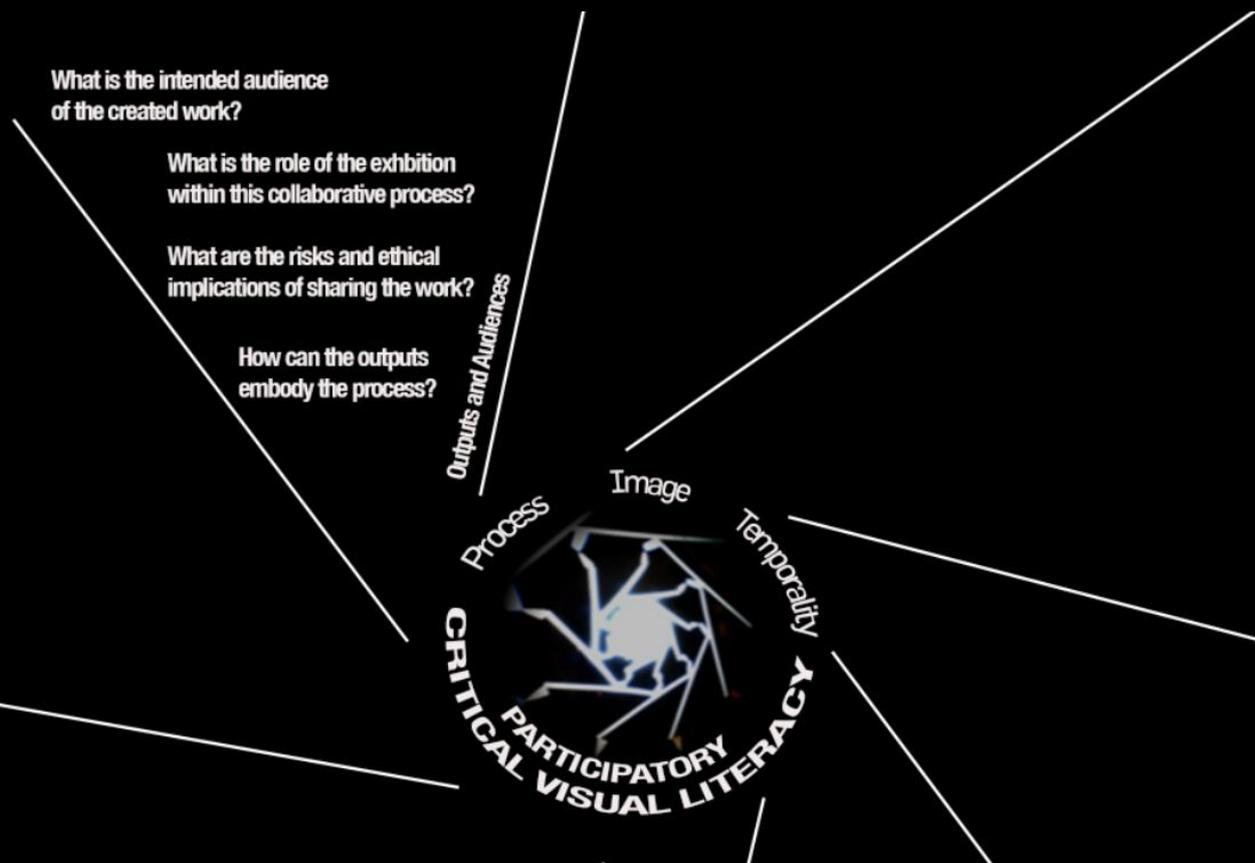
behaviours, as well as our unconscious memories, desires, and fears, which are themselves products of our social contexts. In a way, this suggests that meaning resides beyond what is seen within the photograph. Moreover, Derrida discusses the idea of absence in his proposition of deconstruction that the gaps and absences shape meaning and leave a 'trace' within any act of representation, elaborated by Spivak in the preface of *Of Grammatology*: "...the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Derrida 2016, p.XXXVI). In this way, that absence isn't immediately seen and understood within the photograph; however, it can elicit a response referential to the presence of broader social structures. Therefore, participants in *Who Are These Women?* were encouraged to reflect on what is present but also what is 'absent' within the representation of their photographs through the PCVL model.

To conclude, the synergy of the conscious - or that which can be seen and is present - may pertain to the symbolic realm, along with what is absent and is unseen (or otherwise affective and unconscious), providing a multi-layered process of interpretation within PCVL and the photograph's subsequent analysis by the participants that shaped their accompanying personal narratives. The young women critically reflected on how they constructed meaning and communicated their narratives through their photographs and captions. These photographs and personal narratives do not seek to provide a more authentic and truthful representation; they are fluid subjectivities relevant to a specific time and within a specific context informed by the group dynamics and collaborations in which they were created.

In participatory photography, the way images are analysed by the participants within a group and their subsequent interpretations and narratives should not be viewed as static but fluid, changing with the shifting affective states, subconscious responses, group dynamics and community contexts. Consequently, a holistic approach, which PCVL proposes, does not solely prioritise verbal or visual narratives within the participatory photography process but includes a model that provides an understanding and integration of both within it. The women were asked to capture their interpretations through the arrangement and selection of their photographs and the use of words, titles and captions. Words can capture personal narratives and provide specific contexts, as well as unpack structural symbolism and biases that are inherent in our thinking in relationship to the images, while images can operate at an affective level, which is also necessary for the words to make sense and be understood. The affect of the image remains locked within it and cannot fully be encompassed in words alone. In contrast, words are necessary to provide further context to ground the image in its intended meaning and constructed narratives by the participants. Examples of this can be seen through the work

of the young women who took part in this research and how the images, titles and text function together throughout all of their work and their position within the exhibition. PCVL proposes a model that encompasses a textual and visual narrative developed through critical reflection and group discussion, incorporating the symbolic present within both the caption and the representational aspects of an image. It also considers the affective and embodied experiences locked within the visual, thus offering a multi-layered presentation of the participants' personal interpretations and lived experiences in their final piece of work, as can be viewed in the exhibition accompanying this research.

Outputs, Exhibitions and Audiences



“The workshops were a really great reminder of how inspiring being in a space with creative women is. The exhibition and zine gave the project an end goal to work towards that was motivating, and seeing the final outcome was rewarding.”

By Research Participant from Who Are These Women?

(Taken from the workshop feedback forms)

I came across the following statement when I was running one of the previous participatory photography projects in 2014 in Nottingham: “The final image carries with it the history of the process” (Muniz, Coelho 2014, 4:44-4:56min). It has stayed with me ever since. I encountered it an online video and presentation about Vik Muniz’s project of sandcastles etched on grains of sand (Figure 25), which was done in collaboration with a designer and researcher from MIT, Marcelo Coelho and involved an intricate process of production.

I don’t think I have ever worked on something that is so complicated and difficult. Over the course of 4 years, I asked myself, should I just do this on Photoshop? But you

realise that it is not the same thing because in some way the final image carries with it the history of the process that you have developed (Muniz, Coelho 2014, 4:44-4:56min)

The sentiment of this quote in terms of production raises a valid point about process versus outputs in terms of how the final outputs, which are a result of practice, embody their method of production. I keep going back to this question of whether images that document or are a result of a process-oriented production can fully embody the account of their making. And, if so, how and why? I have not come up with a straightforward answer, but I will attempt to unpack some of these ideas in this section as this is important to understand how outputs from a participatory photography project are disseminated, understood and interpreted by their audiences and the life of the work that succeeded the workshop phase of a project.

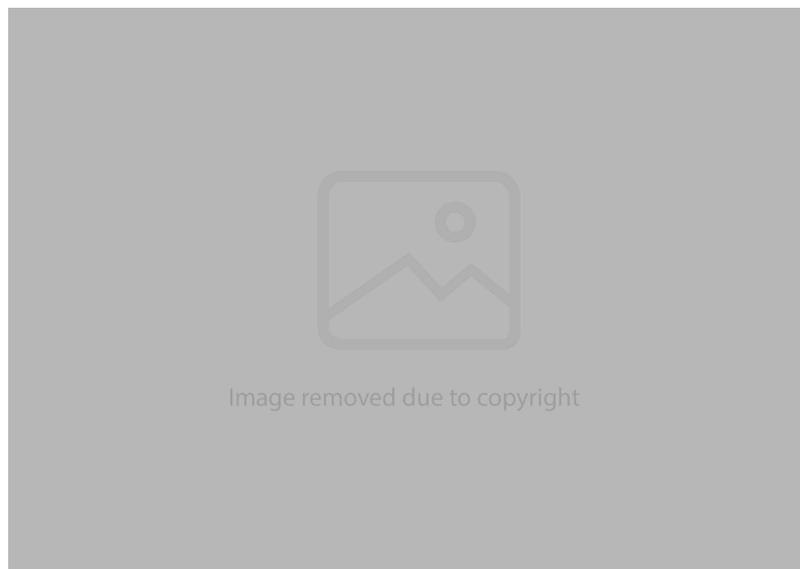


Figure 25 Sandcastles, 2014, by Vic Muniz
<https://vikmuniz.net/gallery/sand-castles> [Accessed 28 November 2023]

Upon further consideration of how a visual work embodies the process of making, incorporating ideas discussed on meaning making from the preceding section in this chapter and going back to Muniz's Sandcastle as an example, when I encountered this work prior to my knowledge of its production process, my response was that of curiosity and wonder in terms of what it is that I am seeing (Figure 25). It was a sort of dissonance based on the extremely large scale of the exhibition images versus the extremely small scale of what it is that I am actually seeing. In the artist's own words, which can be reviewed within the same video as described above, he discusses the following in the broader context of 'recognition' as the viewer encounters his work: "You think you know it, and then you have to know it again. The idea is

that you leave a path, but you leave breadcrumbs for the viewer to follow...this questioning of the image...when you are looking at something, you realise how the hell was this done?" (Muniz, Coehlo 2014, 5:24-5:38min). Thus, the ambiguity of the visual work itself and its presentation creates a sense of wonder. Despite this, without a deliberate explanation and further context of how this work was produced, it would be hard to conceptualise even a glimpse of its process of production. As Luvera states "One of the lessons I have learnt over the years relates to the challenge of conveying information about the process of collaboration" (Luvera 2021, p.230). Henceforth, we go back to the question of the role of words, context, and documentation, which was explored in the previous section.

Within participatory photography, the full extent of what one is visually encountering comes to awareness when the context around its making can be brought to our attention through a form of cross-medium relatedness. As Luvera affirms "it is not enough to only consider what is represented or depicted, the experience of audiences, the contexts in which the work is situated, and the social dynamics of the process that gave rise to the production of the practice must all be taken into account" (Luvera 2021, p.230). This may often include the juxtaposition and use of text, context and documentation, usually heavily influenced by the process of curation, presentation, editing and selection of the final outputs. In this way, we see how meaning and affect are created through the synchronous encounter of an image, words and other contextually mediated data that simultaneously contribute to the affect and interpretation of the final outputs. In this case, we are encountering the work itself within a specific material form and size, within a specific space and historical time, the documentation video of its production, and other descriptive texts and titles that all contribute to the reception of the work and its subsequent interpretation. Therefore, neither the work itself nor the documentation independently can sufficiently encapsulate and convey the process, but ultimately, the collection of materials and different mediums creates something new, providing a glimpse and a subjective version of the process that can then collectively constitute the outputs of a project. This can be viewed in the way the work and outputs of the young women who took part in this research have been brought together to form the final exhibition, which can be viewed [here](#).

Decision-making within *Who Are These Women?*, was a collaborative effort, and each online workshop concluded with a brainstorming session that would outline and define the next steps of the project. This was particularly important when it came to the design of the exhibition, which had to be done during the COVID-19 lockdown. Due to restrictions on in-person gatherings, the group of women brainstormed various ways to showcase their work and

ultimately chose a 3D virtual exhibition. The board, which outlines some of the discussions and suggestions that were generated during the brainstorming session on project outputs, can be viewed on Figure 26. The 3D exhibition format allowed the women to celebrate their achievements despite the physical limitations of the pandemic. This was meant to provide us with a space where we can have a sense of being together. To foster a sense of togetherness, essential for the project's success, each participant was given 3D goggles, creating a shared experience in the digital space. This structure also presented an opportunity to design a symbolically meaningful exhibition environment, both in terms of aesthetics and user interaction. The 3D platform created an opportunity for participants to navigate and curate the exhibition collectively and to learn about 3D exhibitions while embodying the reciprocal structure, which became increasingly central to PCVL.

One significant limitation was that the online celebration lacked the emotional resonance and excitement typically associated with in-person events. The idea of togetherness through virtual avatars within the space did not even remotely render the same feeling as being within a physical space. Therefore, while the online exhibition provided a unique platform for showcasing collaborative outputs during lockdown, it also presented challenges such as screen fatigue, technological accessibility, and the potential loss of embodied engagement, which is central to traditional exhibitions. Considerations and concerns I specifically reflect on and address further in Chapter 4.

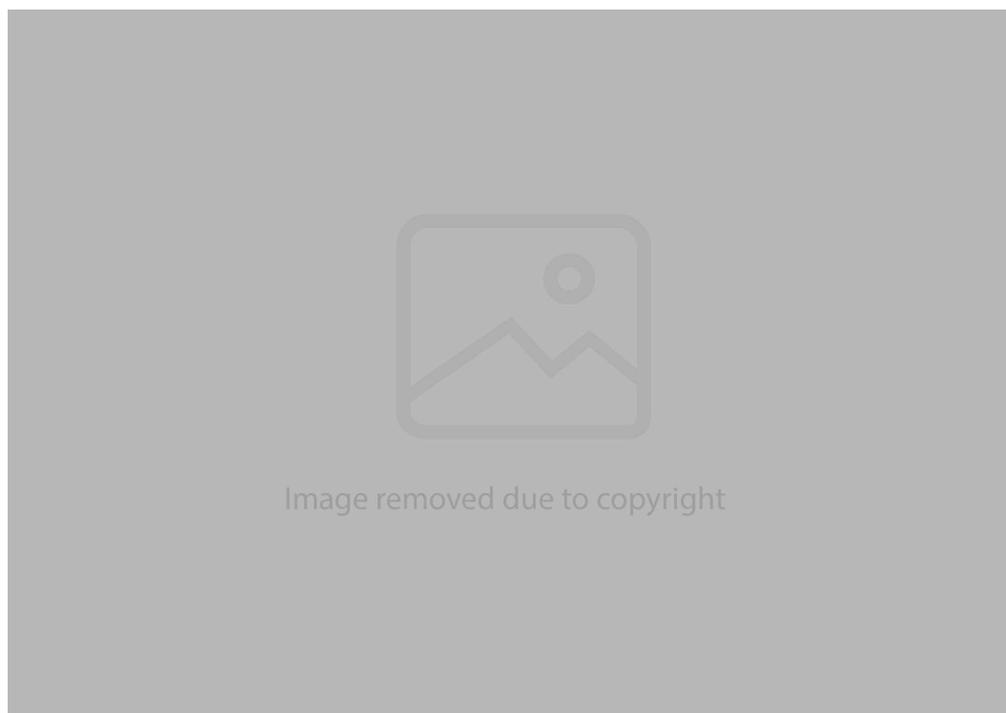


Figure 26 Screenshot of brainstorming session on project outputs within the Who Are These Women? workshops, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

Some of the strengths of having an online exhibition were that it allowed for the design of an imagined space that fully caters to the needs of the work and project in a meaningful and intentional way. In this way, it became not just a space but part of the work itself. It was designed to highlight both individual and collective authorship by creating distinct spaces for each participant that come together in one exhibition, featuring recurring threads and themes that unify the work as a whole. This structure simultaneously aims to preserve and acknowledge the importance of personal narratives while showing unity in diversity and group work. Each woman was given the opportunity to choose and design their own section within the exhibition and zine through several individual and collective meetings, as well as participate in decision-making on the collective elements related to the exhibition's final display.

The decision to utilise an online 3D gallery as the primary output was participant-led, which reflects the participatory ethos of this research, where each woman played an active role in shaping the direction and structure of the project. Ultimately, the creation of a 3D virtual exhibition was a critical choice, which allowed PCVL to be applied in exploring remote engagement during the pandemic. The online structure facilitated the exploration of the strengths and limitations of new forms of interaction and critical reflection mediated by technology.

Despite the attempts to provide a holistic approach through exhibition making, the question of its effectiveness in conveying the process of the workshops in its completeness remains. Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2008) discusses the concept of the 'aura' in relation to a work of art. He describes the aura as linked to the notion of the production and materiality of an artwork, in its singularity and uniqueness and thus the awe it can produce. Benjamin also suggests that mechanical reproduction removes the aura of artwork by allowing its mass production and continuous widespread distribution.

Reproductions, such as photographs or prints, detach the artwork from its original context and, in this way, according to Benjamin dilute its authenticity. Boris Groys takes the concept of the aura into the realm of digital reproduction and the circulation of images, exploring their immateriality in his book *In the Flow*. He suggests in the opening abstract of his work, "...the techniques of mechanical reproduction gave us objects without aura, digital production generates aura without objects" (2016, p.abstract). This alludes to the idea that art and image in a networked space can be a potentially impactful and transformative force in their new, nonrepresentational, and dematerialised form, and thus, their 'aura' persists.

The meaning of aura in philosophy could be perceived as an appropriation of its original spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. The occult understanding of aura implies an awe-inducing experience that is emanated by an object or living creature; an experience that is usually supposed to transcend rational reasoning (Panchadasi 2015). The metaphor of the aura in a world where the embedded use of technology augments the natural world and our understanding of consciousness could also be ascribed to the affective dimension of the artwork, not only its material or living form, as understood by Benjamin. Therefore, the notion of the aura can also be understood as the work of art possessing an 'affective gaze', an identity that is created through its process of production, reproduction and context relative to the subjectivity and 'distance' of its audience in relation to space and time. In this way, the work of art as a result of participatory photography in itself embodies aspects of the process but is not fully able to convey them without the use of context, and is relative to the distance of the audience from the workshop process.

The idea of distance and audience is particularly relevant to the outputs of collaborative and participatory photography projects. The risk of appropriation and the level of perceived authenticity diminishes or is relative to the distance from its original context of creation. In many participatory projects, the degree of participation fades as the initial workshop phase is completed, and the work and outputs start to live a life beyond the participant engagement. This can be particularly problematic in how the outputs and images are digitally disseminated and for projects that inhabit networked spaces. The potential for the collapse of context and the appropriation of meaning of the work and narratives created by the participants vastly increases. Therefore, the collection of outputs, including those beyond the images, should be agreed upon to a greater extent with the participants throughout the workshop phase and beyond.

The outputs of participatory photography projects can be varied and highly depend on the specific group dynamics and facilitation. However, participatory photography projects usually broadly include a body of work created by each participant that will usually comprise images with accompanying captions or longer narratives, documentation materials and other digital or material artefacts useful to the project theme. Daniel Palmer (2013; 2020), who has extensively explored ideas around collaborative photography, recognises that outputs of collaborative projects can go beyond traditional photographic objects and expand into various forms of documentation and dissemination. Participatory photography outputs can include exhibitions, publications, online platforms, or community-driven initiatives that aim to amplify the voices and perspectives of those involved in the photographic process.

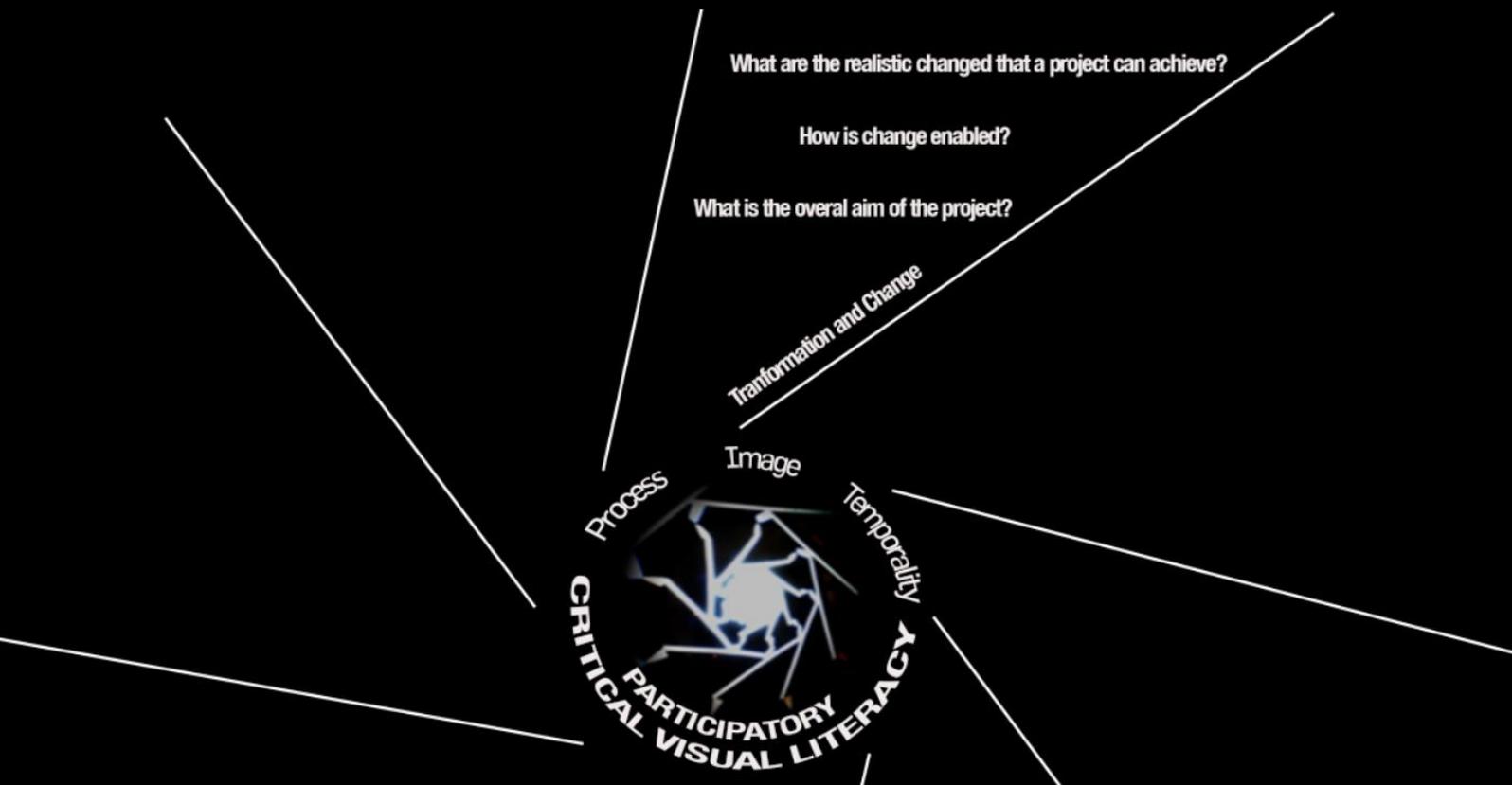
The final outputs, the exhibition format that each project undertakes, and the work's subsequent dissemination can be key ways to reach broader audiences, thereby potentially enacting change and transformation that goes beyond the workshop participants. Exhibitions can serve as important sites by questioning assumptions and dominant power structures, amplifying marginalised voices and addressing relevant social issues. By creating spaces for collective reflection and discussion, exhibitions can provide a variety of perspectives and begin to challenge dominant narratives, as well as further intellectual and emotional growth by providing opportunities for critical thinking and dialogue. It is also essential to consider the social and cultural context in which an exhibition takes place. Exhibitions should reflect the specific interests, concerns, and needs of the local community and people who are taking part in them, and they can serve as catalysts for community engagement and social change (Kester 2013; Helguera 2011). Therefore, the display and dissemination of the work have a vital role in creating visibility and awareness about the topics addressed through participatory photography. Exhibitions offer a space for dialogue and engagement, where viewers can reflect on the narratives presented in the photographs and develop a deeper understanding of the personal, social, cultural, or political themes explored. Last but not least, exhibitions provide a space for participants to celebrate and share their work with a greater audience (when appropriate) and ultimately experience its worth. *Who Are These Women?* was no exception, as one of the participants noted in the feedback form, "...The exhibition and zine gave the project an end goal to work towards that was motivating and seeing the final outcome was rewarding."

As the *Who Are These Women?* exhibition was entirely set up to be viewed online, therefore, it is also critical to consider how meaning is mediated and facilitated through screen interactions and digital images in the context of a disembodied computational space, which I elaborate on in Chapter 4. (2022), Geoff Cox in his essay on "Invisual Literacy" (2022) explores how machine learning and computer vision impact visual literacy, and he introduces the idea of "machine ways of seeing". Within the context of computational processes, he questions the interaction between images and words, the way machine-generated images reinforce dominant narratives and the importance of developing new forms of literacy to analyse and navigate the 'invisible visual culture'. Considering the technological influences and the context of production, as well as the roles of other 'actors' within the process, would be necessary for the production of meaning in participatory photography that engages with remote delivery and engagement.

As part of the editing and selection process for *Who Are These Women?* I once again aimed for "optimal complexity" within the outputs. This concept was introduced earlier in the chapter

and, in this case, can be understood as a balance between 'the right amount' of ambiguity and literal directness. The goal was to communicate effectively through the work while leaving enough room for interpretation and wonder within the viewer's subjectivity. To achieve this balance, we created titles, texts, documentation of the process and captions to guide the viewer's interpretation while allowing a level of ambiguity through the set-up of the space and other visual cues that accompanied the photographs. Thus, forming an installation whose 'aura' can be assumed to include the captioning and interpretation, the careful selection of the final work and how it embodies the process, the documentation, and the subsequent exhibitions and dissemination, which ultimately constitute the overall outputs of this project. All of these outputs play a significant role in the effectiveness of the project and its transformation as a whole.

Transformation and Change



"I'm very private about the things I create on a whole and not very confident that I have a place to share it, mostly because I'm not educated in photography and also don't really feel I have anything unique to say. The workshop discussions were so supportive and inspiring and I think we were all awed by how talented everyone was and to have people who's work I admire see something in my work made me a little more confident."

By Research Participant from Who Are These Women?

(Taken from the workshop feedback forms)

Transformation and change typically lie at the heart of what participatory approaches aim to achieve, and participatory photography is no exception. It serves as a significant motivator for individuals to engage with these methodologies. Furthermore, some of these practices have their roots in participatory action research, where the focus is on taking action, and it often forms the central purpose and objectives of each project. Consequently, social and personal change is at the heart of most socially engaged practices. However, measuring and evaluating change within these practices can be challenging, and its difficulty is usually proportionate to the level of enthusiasm of those embarking on them.

I went to the inaugural CRUX⁵⁸ conference on Photographic Practices: Awareness to Impact in 2023 at the Photographer's Gallery in London, which had a specific focus on measuring impact and social change and presented a variety of photographic practices that pertain to this idea. What stood out to me as part of the discussions was that despite the variety of practices, which included participatory photography, environmental photography and science-based use of photography, they all appeared to share a common struggle to understand and measure the impact of their work. Subsequently, the CRUX conference ended with the promise of the development of a framework that will measure impact, by which I am very intrigued but remain somewhat sceptical of its plausibility. That is not to say that I do not believe in the impact and change that I see take place with most of the projects I have undertaken, but it is based on my concerns about the promise of quantifying and isolating a specific instance that made change possible based on one specific intervention, or an image.

In my conference notes, I came across a question that was raised: "Is it possible for an image to bring about change without any further action from the photographer?" This topic is still being widely debated within the field of photography. However, this is not the focus of my thesis, I will avoid discussing it in detail. Nevertheless, it is an important question to consider when examining change in the context of participatory photography. I believe there to be no straightforward answer, and while the image is central to this process as a sharable catalyst for communication through critical reflection and creative self-expression, change is a complex process which involves a multiplicity of factors. Transformation in itself is a process that is fluid, continuous and influenced by social, non-human and technological posthuman actors, which are often less acknowledged within human-centred participatory practices (Pope 2015). These non-human actors often go unacknowledged but are of significance to the transformation process, and in the case of this research, are heavily reliant on technology.

Traditionally, transformation can take place within the participants themselves and their experiences throughout the project, the impact on a local community, environment or context, or generally within research discourse. This can happen in a broader social and political way where dominant perspectives can be challenged through advocacy efforts and the work that is disseminated. It is important to carefully consider what is realistic and where change can take

⁵⁸ CRUX is a photography research network supported by Bournemouth University in the UK <https://www.cruxphoto.net/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

place within any given project. It would be disingenuous to ascribe change to one singularity, an intervention so dependent on what is visual within an image and yet heavily reliant on that which is invisible - power, group dynamics and other contextual factors that play a major role in the process of personal and social change. These are important ethical considerations, which I explore further in Chapter 4.

Careful attention to language within participatory practices is important when promoting and promising what a project can achieve. Tiffany Fairey, a scholar and practitioner in the field of participatory photography and founding member of the organisation PhotoVoice based in London, in her PhD thesis, attempts to, as the subtitle states: “Re-fram(ing) the promise of participatory photography”. She explores how “Participatory photography initiatives promise to ‘empower’, ‘give voice’ and ‘enable social change’ for marginalised communities through photography” (2015, p.3) and the implications of these promises. Ideas of empowerment are often proposed as a given outcome, and often, no serious consideration is given to what this actually means. The use of empowerment as a word, semantically as well as through its connotation, assumes, implies, and, in this way, affirms an already pre-existing power differential. Therefore, transparency is key to the success of every project, in terms of where participation really takes place within a project, careful consideration and critical reflection, as well as setting realistic expectations in terms of what a single project can achieve.

Fairey (2015) proposes the idea of ‘photography of becoming’, whilst her main argument is based on the concept of the politics of becoming and how this can be transferred to participatory photography. It can be seen as incorporating ideas around the process of becoming. Her thesis highlights the transformative potential of participatory photography, and it advocates for projects that create spaces for participants to explore their identities, express their experiences, and challenge dominant narratives. It argues for an approach that resists homogenisation, embraces ambiguity, and safeguards the pluralistic nature of participatory photography. Ultimately, Tiffany argues that participatory photography initiatives should not simply aim to ‘give voice’ but should enable participants to claim and cultivate their voices within a dynamic and evolving political landscape. It aligns the process of photography with the broader political struggle for recognition, autonomy, and social change. Thus, socially engaged photographic practices cannot be evaluated in isolation from the continuously changing contextual, social and political framework that influences our identities and daily lives. Moreover, change cannot occur at any cost; as the old age saying goes, ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’, and what this means in this context is that good intentions are not enough, and without careful consideration, participatory photography projects can be

tokenistic and end up doing more harm which would obviate any positive changes.

Practitioners often embark with the best intentions; however, this does not always equate to the best outcomes. Ethical considerations, including those related to risk, the impact of power, group dynamics, exposure and vulnerability, need to be carefully considered before embarking on a project like this, which will be explored further in Chapter 4.

Claire Bishop (2017; 2012; 2005) has also questioned the tendency for some socially engaged projects to prioritise social change at the expense of aesthetic considerations. She emphasises that social goals can sometimes come at the expense of the aesthetic and artistic value of these projects. The artistic aspects of participatory photography are essential for captivating audiences and producing critical and meaningful experiences that have the potential to bring about transformative social and political outcomes. Furthermore, the problematic nature of the commercialisation and institutionalisation of some participatory arts projects, which are driven solely by a social change agenda, limits their capacity to bring about authentic social change. Therefore, the power dynamics that can occur during the creation of the final outputs, as well as the creative expression and language that surround it, are significant in terms of how the work communicates as art and will define its subsequent reception and impact.

As discussed in Chapter 1, personal change and therapeutic benefits through participatory projects have been well-documented and should not be underestimated. Participants often report enhanced confidence, skill development, critical engagement with the topic at hand, and a greater understanding of photography and their personal circumstances. Consequently, it is essential to consider the risks involved in working with vulnerable individuals and the harm that the lack of qualified therapeutic support and careful risk assessment can entail. With this in mind, through the literature review, critical analysis and reflection on the practice, I ultimately arrived at establishing the primary methodology of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy, which proposed the eight fundamental tenets and how they are used as specific points of consideration in my research of participatory photography practice: Creativity, Context, Self-Representation, Group Work, Critical Reflection, Interpretation, Outputs, and Transformation.

Who Are These Women? was predominantly focused on the personal impact of each individual within the group and the contribution to a broader qualitative discourse on socially engaged practices and cultural questions related to photography, young women, social media and precarity. Personal change can often be undermined by funding bodies as its impact is not necessarily considered scalable. However, like within autoethnography, it is through the personal that we can learn about the broader cultural implications. Therefore, I ultimately

propose the thinking model of PCVL as integral to designing and understanding the implications and needs for participatory photography projects and their impact. Therefore, in the next chapter, I open space for the women's voices and their work, which is contextualised and presented next, to speak for itself in terms of what has or has not been achieved and its interpretation within *Who Are These Women?*.

Who Are These Women?

Who Are These Women? We are these women!

Excerpt from Alexandra Haslam's short film

This chapter aims to position and contextualise the themes that emerged from the work created by the young women as part of the *Who Are These Women?* project. The themes were conceptualised through the application of PCVL throughout the workshops, as described in the previous methodological chapter. They can broadly be placed within a feminist framework that offers a critical perspective on postfeminism. Postfeminism shifts away from gender equality to individual empowerment, consumer culture, and diverse expressions of femininity. It promises autonomy while encouraging traditional femininity and individual empowerment. However, placing the responsibility entirely within the individual, postfeminist narratives create a distraction from deep structural inequalities that play an important role in shaping women's opportunities and achievements. The work created by the participants highlights some of these structural inequalities as they were experienced by the young women themselves.

Who Are These Women? is an even more pertinent question in a time when 'woman' is pointing to a flexible, culturally situated, and evolving category rather than the biologically predetermined gender binary that has been deeply rooted within patriarchal structures. Acknowledging that gender is not binary, and that trans and non-binary individuals experience gendered oppression differently, this project explores explicitly how patriarchy continues to shape access to equality for individuals who identify as women, and in particular, the cisgender women who chose to be part of this research on a voluntary basis, focusing on areas such as social media representation and employment. As described in the limitations section in Chapter 4, working with cisgender women was not a deliberate choice but a restriction which was a result of recruitment dynamics imposed by the COVID-19 lockdown. However, it is essential to recognise that this approach does not claim to represent all expressions of womanhood but rather to offer situated insights into a specific demographic. Therefore, the group of women represented within this research does not seek to reinforce the understanding of gender as binary or to suggest that they are representative of the struggles that women as a whole are facing, but to recognise that their experiences are part of a broader strive for feminist equality that must also address the experiences of a range of individuals who face oppression.

I aim to refrain from over-analysing the work, as the participants have already developed their themes and captions during the workshop process, and it is important that their voices are not overshadowed by mine. Therefore, this chapter is intended to bring together my subjective voice as a woman, my voice as an academic, and the voices and perspectives of the participants, an entanglement I am finding increasingly challenging due to the ethical implications this introduces. As a woman myself and as someone who has considerable investment in the subject matter, this section will inevitably, at times, incorporate my own subjectivities and reflections within the topics discussed. Ultimately, the following section is an attempt to provide context and to present key themes emerging from the work and my understanding of it. It is not intended to be perceived as collectively objective and fixed.

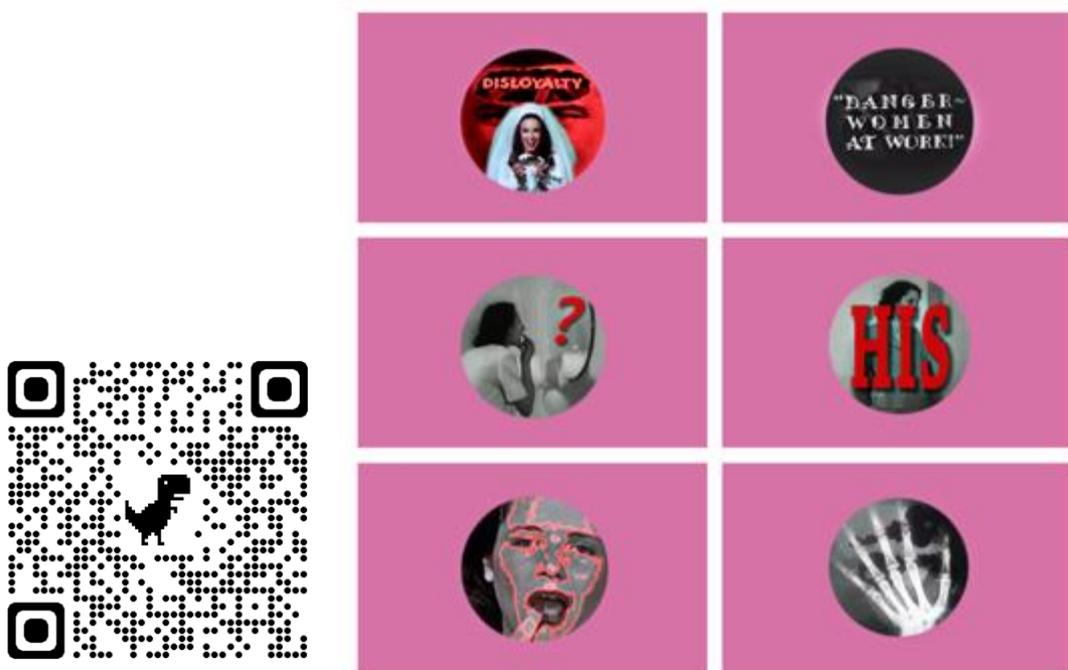


Figure 27 “Women and Their Place” as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Scan or click on the QR code to watch the full Video

Who Are These Women?

The young women participating in the research chose to title the collective work *Who Are These Women?* The title was chosen through group discussion and thorough deliberation. The more we watched Alexandra’s video collectively, the more we were convinced that this was the most all-encompassing title for the work we had produced. There were several good contending options, which can be explored, as seen in. I feel tremendous enthusiasm for the final choice, which I believe is a simple but poignant meta-question that simultaneously asks and answers through its self-referential nature.

The title *Who Are These Women?* is resonant with a statement made by the feminist writer Sarah Ahmed in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, in which she posits, “The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.” (Ahmed 2017, p.2). The parallels with feminism, as an idea and a lived experience (in the case of the young women) being both alive and a life question, can also be applied to the title of this project.

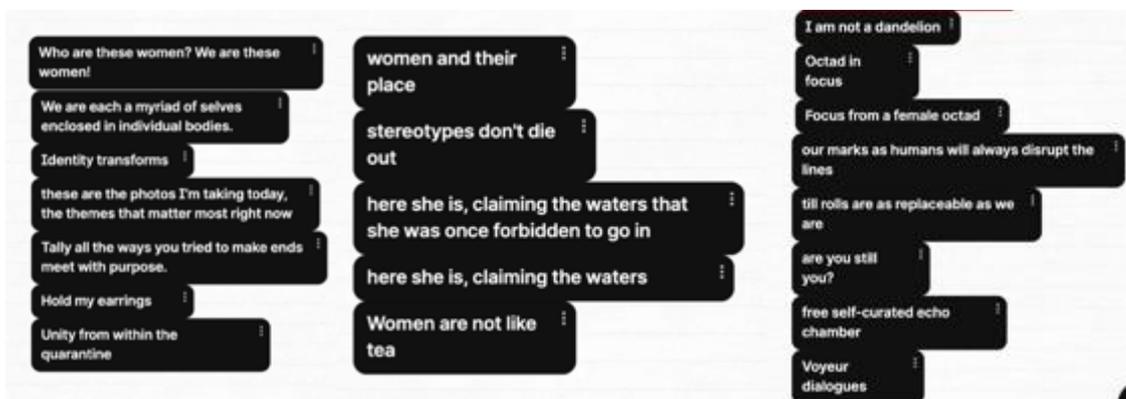


Figure 28 Screenshot of brainstorming ideas for exhibition titles for *Who Are These Women?* during the workshops, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

The title asks a question which, on the surface, has a direct answer: Who Are These Women? These women are the women who took part in this project, and they can all be named. It extends an invitation to the viewer to find out who these women are beyond their names and through the work they have created. It calls for curiosity. What are the young women interested in? What are they? Why are they? Who are they? What is their ‘life’ about? The

work does provide a glimpse into their personal lives through their expressed lived experiences at that point in time. Thus, *Who Are These Women?* is a 'life' question.

The question and, therefore, the work also invite a different reading. Similarly to Ahmed's statement, *Who Are These Women?* can also allude to an 'alive' question in that it points to a question relating to what a woman as a category is, is not, or could be understood as? It underscores how a woman's identity is constructed, shaped, and understood. In Ahmed's words, again, "Feminism as a collective movement is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others. A movement requires us to be moved." (Ahmed 2017, p.5). The work created by the young women invites us to be 'moved', initially, through the dialogue of the process that was undertaken, but also through the dialogue between us as viewers and the work produced.

By asking "who", the title challenges stereotypes and assumptions one might make about young women, particularly those who are young and in precarious employment, as the project alludes to within the description of the exhibition. The word "who" has the potential to push beyond the initial surface-level judgment about who these women are. It can offer a glimpse into the work that encapsulates the unique perspective and experience of each young woman. Moreover, "are" invites a reflection on photographic representation through the project's focus on participatory photography and the use of images within the work. It offers a reflection on how images can shape and be shaped by the identities of those depicted in them. "Are" these women confined within and objectified by their visual representations? Photographs play a role in constructing or deconstructing identities. The images in the exhibition reflect the way these women perceive themselves, their work, and their place in society. Lastly, the posed question within the title and the emerging themes within this project relate to women's precarity and identity, and their images could be seen as a commentary on broader social issues. The title invites viewers to reflect on the role that images play in shaping perceptions of women, the impact of precarious employment on their lives, and the way society views and values different identities.

In one of her pieces, project participant Shahreen Vayani, depicts fingerprints on tills rolls made by members of her family waving in the wind (Figure 29). Part of the caption of her piece of work notes, "...our marks as humans will always disrupt the lines". This also speaks to *Who Are These Women?* As a project, it leaves a mark by women for the cause of women. It attempts to disrupt the existing lines by asking "life" questions that are also very much "alive".



Whilst thinking about the barriers to employment that I have faced, that I currently face, many words came to mind.

Gender, ethnicity, education, gatekeepers, experience or lack thereof... all of them whilst probably legitimate felt somewhat hollow. The two words that I couldn't shake off, that feel intangible, invisible, and heavy are; capitalism and depression. I tried and failed at deconstructing what these words and more importantly their intersections mean to me visually.

Instead, I share with you barriers as what barriers feel like, neat, weighted, throne-like and embellished with the disposable. Their darkness is broken through by small movements, the strength of which is grounded in community. Till roles are as replaceable as we are in the grand machine of work, I laid four of these out for the family I live with to finger paint onto, our marks as humans will always disrupt the lines.

Figure 29 Untitled as part of Who Are These Women?, 2021, by Shahreen Vayani (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233085> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Feminism and Identities in Flux



Growing up in the province (rural) Philippines in the 50's, there were still a lot more restrictions for women then. My mother and her sister were not allowed to swim in the sea (bay-bay) or the riverbanks that surrounded the tiny island that they grew up on. Her sister and her would watch their 7 brothers splash in the waters from the bank side. When she moved to the UK in the 70's, she only learned how to swim when I did in the 90's. We returned decades later. Here she is, claiming the waters she was forbidden to go in.

Figure 30 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Victoria Aquino (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233083> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Another research participant, Victoria Aquino (Figure 30), describes in her pieces her mother's and her mother's sister's experiences growing up in the Philippines in the 1950s. Unlike their brothers, the young women were not allowed to swim in the sea or in the rivers. This personal account highlights some of the inequalities women have historically faced across the globe. These oppressions, to varying degrees in different cultures, extend to access to education and employment and often to outright violence and overt, as well as covert discrimination. Feminist efforts, in the last century as a movement and theory, have sought to address these disparities by advocating for gender equality and by challenging the systemic and cultural barriers that prevent women from achieving their full potential. This includes dismantling stereotypes, challenging patriarchal power structures, and promoting policies and practices that support gender diversity and inclusivity.

Aquino's photograph (Figure 30) depicts a silhouette of her mother in the sea, captured decades after her childhood experiences of not being allowed to go into the water. Victoria contextualises this further in her caption by noting, "Here she is claiming the waters she was forbidden to go in". Her statement can be interpreted as a representation of the changes that are a result of feminist efforts that have a direct impact on the daily activities of women. However, despite the progress made by feminist activists and scholars, gender disparities

continue to exist to different extents depending on the culture, in areas such as equal pay, representation in leadership positions, access to healthcare and reproductive rights, and objectification. The Global Gender Gap report from 2023 states that it will take 131 years at the current rate to close this gender parity gap. The report includes educational attainment, health and survival, political empowerment and economic factors such as participation and opportunities from 145 countries and tracks these developments since the inception of this initiative by the World Economic Forum in 2006. Consequently, the fight for gender equality remains an ongoing endeavour that requires the collective effort of individuals, organisations, scholars and institutions and has a direct impact on women's identities.

In *Feminism is for EVERYBODY*, bell hooks provides a straightforward definition that encapsulates the sentiment behind the feminist movement: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." (2014, p.VIII). The title *Feminism is for EVERYBODY* suggests that feminism is the struggle for equality in every way, an endeavour that is not for women alone. She makes the case that feminism is not simply about the sex one is born into, but rather, it involves the intersection of several forms of oppression where gender cannot be separated from race, class, and sexuality. She also urges for an inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist identity.

Understanding women's experiences is essential to understanding how women's identities are shaped and informed by broader cultural and social factors. Nikki Robson's body of work in Figure 31 can be viewed as an exploration of her experience as a young woman and the process of identity formation. She notes, "Much like any external creation, the creation of yourself is a process, an ever-evolving thing. The version you present today mightn't be the version you want to present a year from now." Her reflections point to an identity in a state of constant flux, which is formed through an ongoing process rather than made up of inherent qualities.



We are each a myriad of selves enclosed in individual bodies. Constantly in flux, adapting and reacting to the impressions around us, only vaguely aware of the alchemy operating within.

Much like any external creation, the creation of yourself is a process, an ever-evolving thing. The version you present today mightn't be the version you want to present a year from now. Identity transforms, its labels grow outdated, the physical body that so much of identity's dictations rely on is nothing more than a host for that alchemy inside.

The more I explore the key themes in the artwork I make the more confused I become, because pinning it all down into a couple of words or just one selected sequence of pictures seems so final. But, in actuality, these are the photos I'm taking today, the themes that matter most right now. The self and how it transpires into all we do, the process.

Figure 31 "Myriad of Selves" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Nikki Robson (Research Participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233090> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Robson also proceeds to point out that “Identity transforms, its labels grow outdated”, which challenges the concept of a fixed identity and the socially constructed categorisation of difference, as well as essentialist and biologically deterministic views on human nature. In the same vein, Tracy Ore’s book *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (2008) explores how socially constructed categories influence people’s perceptions, experiences, and interactions. Ore explores not only how these categories impact individuals who belong to them but also how they are interconnected and perpetuated within society. Social categories often reinforce hierarchies, privileging certain groups based on race, gender, class, sexuality, or other factors. Treating these categories as “natural” contributes to ongoing inequality.

Consequently, how we understand and shape our identities can be understood as a complex process rooted in socially constructed ideas often related to race, gender, socioeconomic background, age and ability. Furthermore, intersectionality, as initially proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasises that these various aspects of identity do not exist in isolation; they interact with and influence each other in complex ways. It follows that an individual’s experiences and opportunities are not solely determined by one aspect of their identity but rather by the combination of multiple identities and the systems of power and privilege associated with each. Furthermore, Robson’s photographs and their depictions of layers of paint, materials and flowers, marked by scattered ‘I’s, allude to this multi-layered understanding of identity. Through her photographs, we gain a sense of identity as complex and messy. The “i” can also be interpreted as an interplay between I as self and i as identity – the position and understanding of the I within (i)dentify.

Robson goes on to explore the female body and its categorisation through gender, “...the physical body that so much of identity’s dictations rely on is nothing more than a host for that alchemy inside.” The work of Judith Butler stands out as particularly influential in advancing our understanding of the complex nature of gender identity. Butler explores the performative aspects of gender, arguing that it is not an essentialist construct but rather a fluid and constantly shifting identity that is constructed through a range of social norms and repetitive behaviours which have been naturalised. Her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990) provides an influential critique of essentialist views of gender. It offers a compelling alternative perspective that has proven highly influential in shaping contemporary feminist discourse. Prevalent essentialist norms dictate that the physical body both determines gender identity as well as affirms it. This is elucidated by Susan Bordo in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western*

Culture, and the Body, where she explores the relationship of the female body with culture. In the chapter “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, she notes, “The body - what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body - is a medium of culture.” (2003, p.165). Bordo also notes that “The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture”. In a way, I would argue that our bodies and our identities do not entirely belong to us.

Gender norms, roles, and inequalities that contribute to our understanding of identity and its performance are deeply rooted in our society through a complex interplay of numerous factors. Socialisation is one such factor. It begins from an early age and plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' perception of gender roles and expectations. Through societal beliefs, media portrayals, and institutional policies, gender norms are continually reinforced, leading to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Additionally, everyday interactions and language further entrench these norms, making it difficult to challenge them.

In spite of the ongoing gender disparities, postfeminist regimes in visual representation promote a new portrayal of women as ‘empowered’, who have broken free from patriarchal norms. This has led to the emergence of new forms of youthful femininity and depictions of women that are prominent in the postfeminist networked mediascape, which mainly caters to young women (Dobson 2015). However, under 'digital neoliberalism'⁵⁹ (Steger and Roy 2020, p.127), images and re-enacted self-representations can be linked to profit-making systems where gendered identities, amongst others, intersect with socioeconomic status. Consequently, the everyday practice of sharing images as a cultural practice through photography and networked images also becomes complicit in the process of perpetuating gender inequalities through the representation of women and gender roles. It is critical to challenge and disrupt these representations through alternative visual narratives by creating diverse and inclusive representations of gender. By working with this group of young women and through participatory photography and PCVL, this research has explored the themes of women’s identity, precarity and how images are complicit in shaping these young women’s identities, which is explored next.

⁵⁹ Digital neoliberalism is a reference to unregulated use of personal data (Steger and Roy 2020, p.127).

Women, Precarity and Domestic Spaces



Figure 32 "Stereotypes Refuse to Die Out" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alma Silva (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233063> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

I grew up in Bulgaria in the mid-1990s. The digital camera was reserved for a chosen few, usually wealthy and successful male photographers. As a young woman at the time, in the male-dominated profession of photography, I was often told that I would struggle to carry my equipment or that I was studying to be 'jobless'. These comments implied that I would be wise to choose a more lucrative or 'feminine' career pathway. The often harsh reality associated even to this day with making a living through the arts, particularly as a woman, and the lack of self-esteem to transcend what the world around me kept implying about the lack of possibility in making a living by being a photographer, diverted my attention for the best part of a decade from photography to other more economically favourable endeavours. However, for the duration of that diversion, a considerable sense of dissatisfaction accompanied me along the way until I found the courage to find a pathway back to photography. These are the choices women must frequently contend with: our own desires and our self-image, which can often conflict with what society expects of us.

Three decades later, the objectified representation of women has become central to photographic discourse and exploded as a central practice through the 'selfie'. The dissemination of selfies on social media and technology gave rise to networked cultures. Women's representation through images in mainstream media and social media persists. However, the underrepresentation of women in work life ironically is also persistent. I have often found myself straddled between these two perspectives: on the one hand, being offered representations as a subject of an image, and on the other, disproportionately under-represented within areas that are reserved solely for men. An example of this is the under-representation of women photographers within Magnum Photos⁶⁰ and the over-representation of women within the photographs themselves. This is highlighted in a discussion of Susan Meiselas' work, who is a member of the organisation and how "her own 'dwelling' within these two worlds has influenced her", as well as the organisation themselves recognising that "There has never been a more topical time to talk about female representation in photography"⁶¹ (Havlin 2018). The underrepresentation of women still happening to this day in work life, photographic committees and professional photographic organisations is astounding. This lack of representation of women within what was once perceived as male-dominated professions is

⁶⁰ Magnum Photos is a well-established organisation for Documentary Photography based in London.

⁶¹ Full quote states: "There has never been a more topical time to talk about female representation in photography, not only the number of female photographers working in the male-dominated photojournalism industry but also with regards to how women themselves are depicted. Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas has first-hand experience of both of these aspects of the issue. Speaking at a recent event, where she discussed female representation, Meiselas referenced how her own "dwelling" within these two worlds has influenced her work: "The dwelling is the more mysterious place that interconnects you, and the work you find yourself doing." (Havlin 2018)

still prevalent, especially within decision-making roles. This also occurs across many industries, including STEM professions and especially in the most senior roles.

I am assigned to what they can drain of me with the most minimal credit.

My stories are rejected & dissected & replaced for the male stage.

Yet I will be called upon once again, to edit their edit of myself.

I am called upon solely for my 'Woman's Touch' to a male's identity stamped all over what was mine.

I will erase & correct such fantastic fictionalized facts...

... all under his name.

The Woman's Touch will win him awards, admiration, applause.

I should think what I speak out matters,

Or how my overgrown thoughts hold worth,

But let's now fool ourselves,

No one sits around for the credits.



Figure 33 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam, (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The work of Alexandra Haslam (Figure 33), one of the research participants, relates to these problems of representation of women in the workforce through her experience as a young woman trying to make it within the creative industries. She expresses as part of the analysis of her image that “I am assigned to what they can drain of me with the most minimal credit...I am called upon solely for my ‘Woman’s Touch’ to a male’s identity stamped all over what was mine”. This was said in reference to a project Haslam took part in at the same time as the *Who Are These Women?* workshops. She was the only woman on the team of cinematographers, and her work and writing clearly expressed her disdain at the fact that she was the only one in the group who was not offered any credit or financial reward for her work. Haslam’s experience

highlights the precariousness that women often face when engaging in freelance work and how they can be particularly affected by the gender pay gap and the gig economy⁶².

This also points to the 'feminisation' of labour within the creative industries, where many women often find themselves in precarious, low-paid, and temporary roles due to engrained gendered stereotypes and expectations. As discussed by Angela McRobbie, in her book *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (2016, p.89), she suggests that women's voices and concerns surrounding issues like livelihoods and financial security might be marginalised within professional circles dominated by CEOs and lobbyists which would usually be held by men. This indicates potential gendered responses to the challenges faced by women in these industries. Moreover, McRobbie points to the struggles of balancing creative careers with domestic and caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the intersection of gendered caregiving expectations with the demands of precarious work, particularly impacting women.

Gig work can be characterised by freelance work often conducted via digital platforms that usually lacks consistency and is paid on an hourly basis. This type of work provides no financial security and may provide an accessible entry point to the labour market for women who face barriers in traditional employment due to gender bias, discrimination, or lack of opportunities. In some cases, women might turn to gig work out of necessity due to a lack of stable job opportunities in their field (James 2022). The gig economy's lack of standardised wages and pay negotiation can lead to lower pay for workers. Women, who often face a lower wage due to the gender pay gap in traditional employment, might be drawn to gig work despite the potential for lower earnings. Furthermore, women are much more likely to engage in unpaid digital labour through the promise of 'becoming an influencer' on social media, where identity is carefully constructed and performed through images as a form of commodification of the female body to serve a specific capitalist agenda, which will be explored further later in this chapter.

⁶² Gig economy is characterised with the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work in the contemporary labour market. It is a discernible trend towards the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, which is becoming increasingly common in comparison to permanent jobs (Vallas and Schor 2020).



Figure 34 "Employment/Unemployment" features in the exhibited part of the Theorem Conference, 2018, by Anonymous, 2018 (Brailsford 2018b)

Such precarious work is a huge issue for society that affects many. An anonymous submission at a photography call-out during the Theorem conference and exhibition in 2018 portrayed this idea effectively. The submission (Figure 34) depicted employment through a close-up photograph of a dead cockroach lying on its back with the caption "employment/unemployment" (Brailsford 2018b). The photograph summarises the general dilemmas related to contemporary issues of employment, the gig economy, and the precarity that comes with them. It suggests that an individual's worth and ability to exist in society are often measured by their financial worth, and their identities are often linked to their employment status. In contemporary culture, success is often measured by the security of one's job, and the unemployed are often stigmatised as "losers." Precarious employment can be exploitative and requires a level of resilience that is not attainable for everyone. For some, as depicted in the photograph, it may mean choosing the lesser of two evils. For others, employment is a matter of survival.

Employment
Paid
Contract
Power
For money
Working for a
living
Hold down a job
9-5
Labour
Emotional
Physical
Active
Trade
Exertion
Grind
Gruntwork
Strain
Stress
Cultivate
Endeavour
Work
Experience
Freelance
Exchange
Strain
Sweat drudge
Earn
Hustle
Perform
Profit
Win
Secure
Reap
Living
Breathing
Continuing
Ongoing
Vital
Existence
Maintain
Sustenance

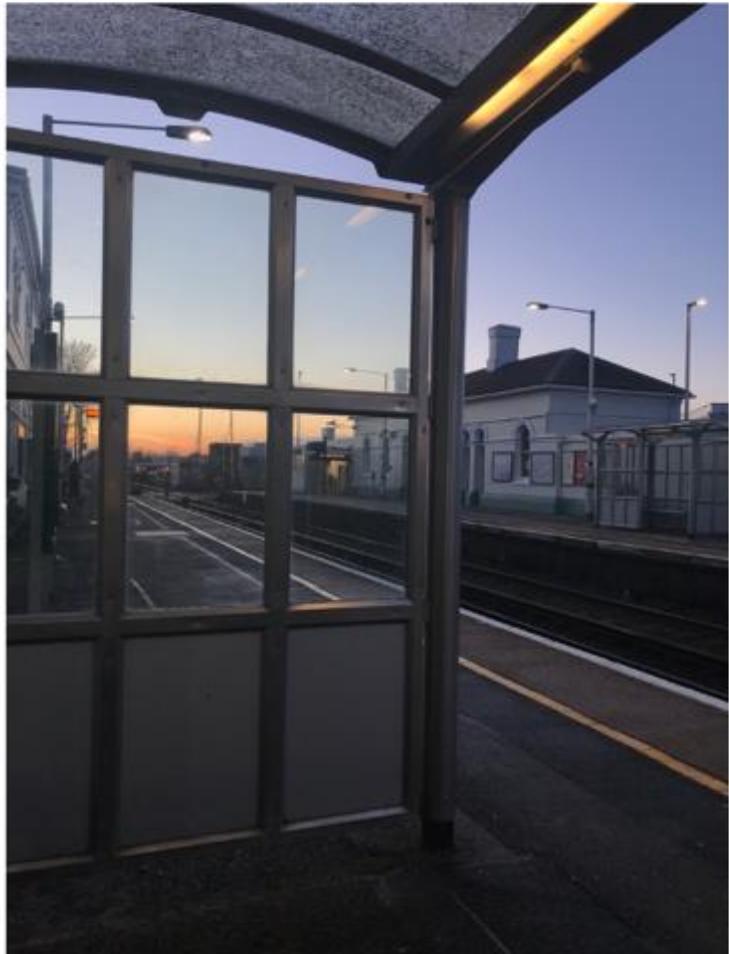


Figure 35 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Kate Freer (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232281> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Young women are disproportionately affected by these issues of employment and find themselves with a much higher unemployment rate. Kate Freer, a research participant, lists all the words she associated with precarity and employment in Figure 35. According to Eurostat, 2020, there is a surprising and significantly greater number of young women who find themselves without a job in Europe, as we can visually see in Figure 36. Furthermore, young women's potential for precarity under neoliberalism⁶³ is exacerbated by these higher unemployment rates and an unresolved gender pay gap where they are expected to bear complete responsibility for their achievements. According to Census Bureau US “gender pay gap is wider among men and women with a bachelor’s degree than among those without” (Day 2019), with an increasing pay gap for part-time female workers in the UK according to the National Statistics Centre (2020). A potential contributing factor for this is undoubtedly the disproportionately higher volumes of hidden labour, which have been particularly aggravated in times of recession (Negra and Tasker 2014). A similar trend has also been reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women struggling to juggle between domestic life and work life, referred to by the IFM⁶⁴ in a report from 2021 as a ‘she-cession’ (Fabrizio et al. 2021). This raises important questions in relation to young women’s identities, equal opportunities, domestic roles and barriers to employment that they might be facing in this increasingly digital, automated and complex employability market mediated by visual representations.

⁶³ Neoliberalism as an economic and political ideology emphasises individualism, self-reliance, and market-driven values and limited government intervention in economic matters. It emphasises the importance of free-market capitalism, individualism, deregulation, and privatisation (Steger and Roy 2020). Neoliberalism places great importance on individualism and self-empowerment, advocating for the pursuit of self-enterprise, competition, and personal responsibility. Unfortunately, this approach may lead to a lack of focus on addressing systemic issues related to precarity, as it implies that individuals can overcome obstacles solely through their own efforts. This can be problematic, as it fails to acknowledge the impact of larger societal structures and may ultimately hinder progress towards addressing systemic inequalities and oppression based on gender, race, class and able-ness.

⁶⁴ International Monetary Fund

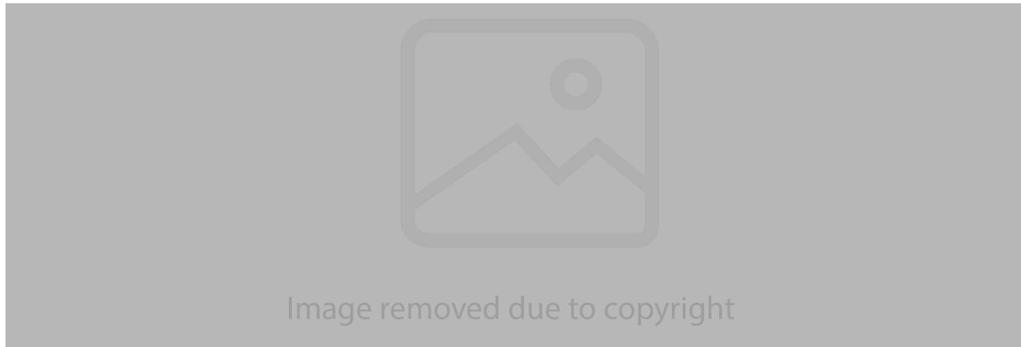


Figure 36 Excerpt from the Eurostat report, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training#NEETs: a analysis by sex and age](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#NEETs:_a_analysis_by_sex_and_age) [Accessed 23 November 2023]

As someone who was raised in my early years under a communist totalitarian regime, I am keenly aware of the promises and claims of gender equality that were never achieved. Yes, most women worked outside the home, yet most were still bound to specific gendered employment pathways. In addition, domestic labour remained solely reserved for women. Those who were able to cope strove for a superwoman ideal, which included being simultaneously a model employee, a devoted mother, a stunning wife, a selfless caregiver, an innovative chef, and an efficient homekeeper. The plethora of demands on these superwomen further tipped the scales in favour of their male counterparts. However, in a similar way to neoliberal views of femininity that subsequently swept across the East and West, it gave rise to a postfeminist sentiment which suggests equality is done and dusted.

Alma Silva's photograph titled "Stereotypes Refuse to Die Out" (Figure 32) addresses some of these concerns and the societal pressures placed on women in the various roles that are expected of them. The depicted individual in the image has a gendered body, a woman's body, that is lying down on a kitchen worktop and wearing a short dress. A pose that can potentially be perceived as sexualised and thus objectified and conforming to the 'male gaze'⁶⁵. The woman's face is painted and alludes to the masks one must wear to conform to societal

⁶⁵ The male gaze is term used to describe the tendency to sexualise and objectify women and it was coined as a term by Laura Mulvey a feminist film theorist and scholar. She developed the idea of the male gaze in her seminal essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema in 1975 (Mulvey 1975).

expectations. Alma proceeds to raise the following poignant questions as part of the text that accompanies her work.

Does my makeup mask my real feelings?

Why must I paint myself like a clown?

Does my vagina define my role?

Am I good at cleaning because I'm a woman?

Is it my role to serve?

Do I have to give up my dreams to fulfil my role as a baby maker?

She does not provide an answer but points our attention to the themes that she finds relevant in her experience as a young woman. The subject's painted face depicted in the photograph conjures up a doll-like impression, which relates to the questions, "Does my makeup mask my real feelings?" and "Why must I paint myself like a clown?". In this way, the painted face becomes a representation of the process of conforming to the expected gendered bodily stereotypes of femininity and how women inadvertently choose to perform them.

It is also worth observing that the subject is positioned within the domestic space of the kitchen amongst kitchen utensils and unwashed dishes. She is wearing a domestic glove, alluding to being the bearer of the work within this space. The washing up is there waiting, as if calling her to perform her duties. However, the gesture of the body gives out mixed signals as it refers to leisure and rest or assumes a pose which could be interpreted as 'sexually available' in the way it is positioned on the counter and is in contrast with the hand reaching out wearing the domestic glove as if ready to start performing its household duties. This contradiction perhaps aligns with some of Alma's questions: "Do I have to give up my dreams to fulfil my role...?" "Is it my role to serve?" "Am I good at cleaning because I'm a woman?".

In *Gendered Spaces* (1992), Daphne Spain explores special segregation based on gender. Traditionally, the kitchen as a domestic space has served to reinforce gender norms and expectations. Women were expected to excel in domestic tasks, while men were often discouraged from participating, and doing so was likely to be perceived as a threat to their masculinity. This gendered division of labour and space has also been perpetuated through various forms of media through the use of visual tropes, including advertisements, photography, and films. Women are often depicted in the kitchen, further reinforcing the idea that it is their natural or primary domain.

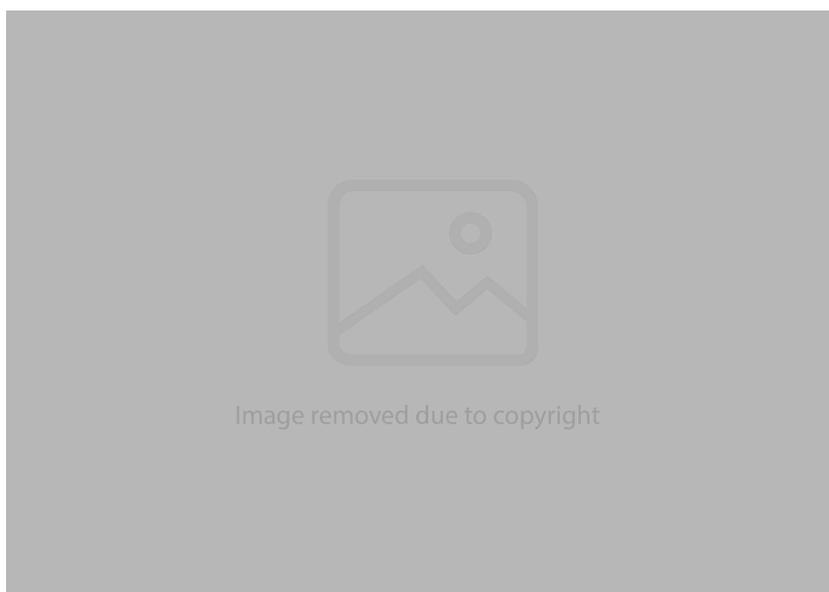


Figure 37 *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, by Martha Rosler <https://www.eai.org/titles/semiotics-of-the-kitchen> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of a Kitchen* (Figure 37) is a performance-based moving image in which she recontextualises the use of kitchen utensils within the domestic space, replacing them with violent and unexpected acts and gestures. She exposes the roles and stereotypes assigned to women and the way in which these roles have been constructed through cultural norms, and thus subverts the kitchen as a gendered space. Alma's image (Figure 32), in a similar way to Rosler's performative video, can be seen as a critique of the domestic roles and expectations that society has historically placed on women, particularly in gendered spaces like the kitchen. Silva summarises the sentiment in her International Women's Day Instagram post accompanying the same photograph (Figure 32) as part of the workshop series on the 8th of March in 2021: "It's 2021 and still I get treated at work like I'm the only one who knows how to use the dishwasher. With the technological advances we have, it's a wonder how our society has only just started to consider our roles as women in the workplace."⁶⁶ According to her reflection, she is pointing our attention to the fact that the kitchen as a space is not only gendered within domestic environments but also in the workplace.

⁶⁶ The image and text can be seen on this Instagram post <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKgNBtLcLu/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

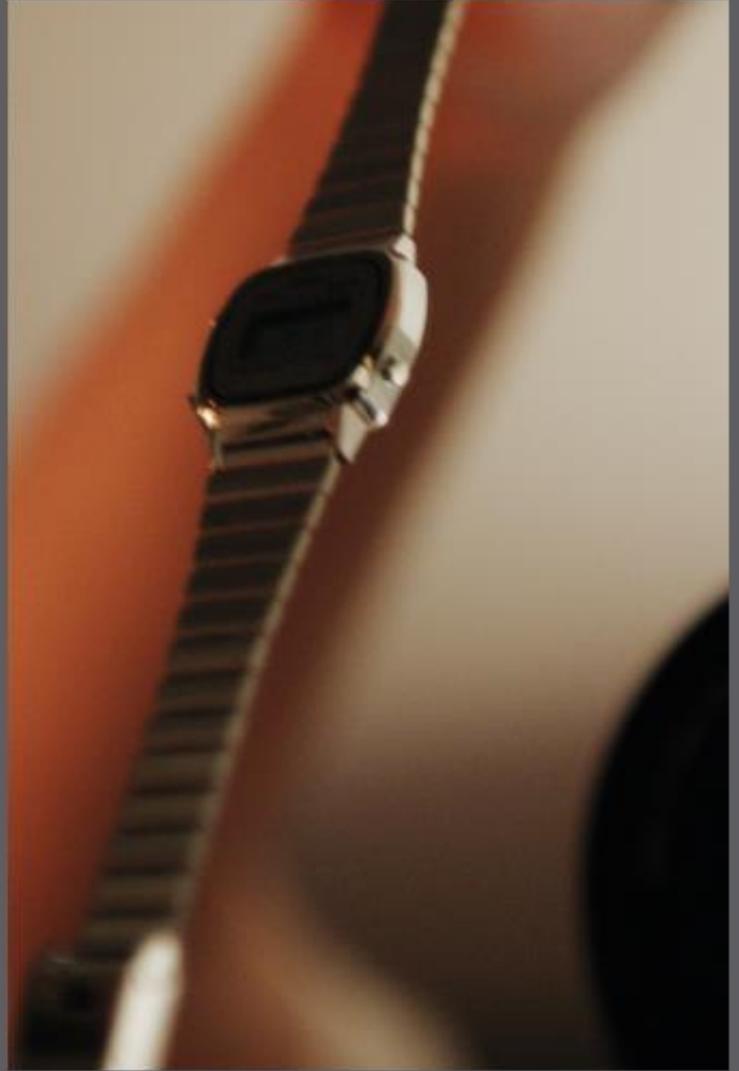


Figure 38 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Rachel Goulding (Research Participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233087> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Similarly to Silva's image, Rachel Goulding's work in Figure 38 conversely exposes a contradiction and juxtaposes the different roles that a woman has to conform to. Goulding also highlights the unrealistic expectation of women to perform all these roles well and at once. Goulding's diptych depicts a close-up of a hand donning a yellow domestic rubber glove. A ring adorns each finger over the loose rubber folds of the glove, conjuring a jarring and unexpected ensemble. The close-up portrayal of the utilitarian loose yellow glove bejewelled with glamorous rings creates a sense of incongruence that can be perceived as unnatural. This exposes the contradictions within gendered roles and suggests that their naturalisation may be socially constructed.

On the right side of the diptych, Goulding depicts a watch, which can be interpreted to represent time: the long hours in the day needed for women to go to work, perform their domestic and caretaking tasks, and the tasks required to sustain and conform to feminine beauty standards that are expected of them. This can also be seen as a commentary on postfeminist image representations, which suggest that women can 'have it all' - a successful career, a fulfilling personal life, a sexy body, a picture-perfect home, and overachieving children. However, as suggested by Diane Negra in her book *What a Girl Wants* (2009), the aspiration to excel in all these roles can be problematic and contradictory when confronted with the realities of limited time, resources, and increasing societal expectations. The pressure to excel in multiple areas simultaneously can create a sense of inadequacy and unachievable expectations, which can inadvertently lead to a sense of failure.

Young women face immense pressure to fulfil multiple roles, not just on a personal level but also in the public domain, where their lives are turned into shareable content. This content is consumed and scrutinised without recognition of the potentially precarious conditions that underlie their polished online personas, including the economic, social, and emotional labour involved in curating them. Women's participation in a system that profits from their daily activities and interactions only further exacerbates their vulnerability. Maintaining an online presence is now a form of hidden digital labour that adds to the hidden domestic labour already delegated to women. It is a time-consuming and emotional investment that is integral to projecting the image of having achieved a work-life balance and self-fulfilment, yet it is rarely acknowledged. Nikki Robson's work in Figure 39 depicts a woman outside a window, her body precariously dangling outside the window, its posture heavy under its own weight. This represents the emotional and physical toll of attempting to perform these roles and to meet societal expectations. The posture of the body emphasises the inherent perils and precarity that can come with them. Robson concludes in her analysis of her photo with despondence and

resignation: “Rhythms of routines, autopilot motions, feed off of another space and just exist mindless here for a while. It’s the way of things.” Hidden labour is part of the broader landscape where billions of individuals invest time and engage with digital labour on corporate platforms, providing invaluable data for the attention economy⁶⁷ in which the networked photograph is significantly implicated.



I fall into this complex devotion to worth and feel my tether to freedom slip. Survive. Accept the meaningless hours to live in deeper moments. Rhythms of routines, autopilot motions, feed off of another space and just exist mindless here for a while. It’s the way of things.

Figure 39 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Nikki Robson (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233090> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

⁶⁷ Often referred to as the commodification of human attention (Croghan and Kinsley 2012)

Networked Spaces, Networked Images and Echo Chambers



Figure 40 "Free Self-Curated Echo Chamber" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021,
by Shahreen Vayani, (Research participant)

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233085>

[Accessed 23 November 2023]

Visual culture and photography play an important role in how we shape our identity and view ourselves, as well as how we understand the world around us. Digital photography introduced a range of complexities in terms of how we consume and produce images. I recall my excitement around the release of the early digital cameras and how the possibility of owning one felt like a distant possibility to me at the time. The transformation in how we engage with photography that followed has been remarkable. The analogue image has been replaced by the digital. This opened up unprecedented opportunities, as well as challenges that were significantly different from what we understood photography to be until then.

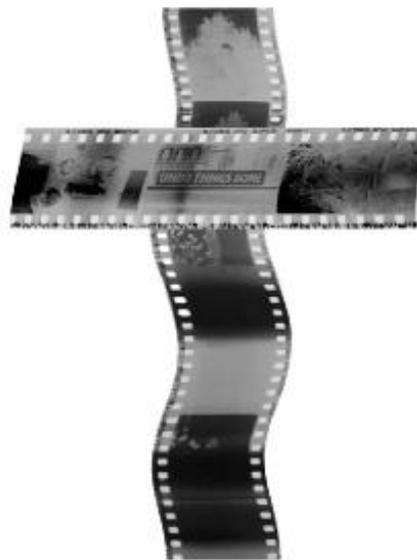


Figure 41 Untitled as part of Who Are These Women?, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam (Research participant)

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

Another of Alexandra Haslam's pieces of work in Figure 41 can be viewed as a commentary on this transition within photography. It depicts a cross that is made up of photographic negatives through which several interpretations emerge. The analogue photographic negatives positioned in the shape of a cross represent 'the death of photography'⁶⁸. However, this death also marks the beginning of a transformation and, therefore, the birth of new photographic ontologies of the digital networked image. The breakdown of photography as we previously understood it and its transition, as depicted by Haslam, also appears to be 'wavering'. Thus, this

⁶⁸ The death of photography is closely related to the crisis of representation and photographs being understood as evidence or truth and the rise of digital photography also referred to as post photography (Batchen 1994).

could be seen as a reference to photography's unstable and changing theoretical landscape within the post-photographic⁶⁹ era.

With the proliferation of digital technology came the democratisation of photography through social media and the smartphone, which requires a re-evaluation of how photography functions in the world and the way visual culture shapes our understanding of our individual and collective identities. Haslam's religious symbolism (through the cross) can also be interpreted as the new 'revered' status of photography and its ubiquitous presence within contemporary visual culture. It can also be viewed as referential to photography's role in dictating our understanding of ourselves, the world and others, as well as its role in perpetuating dominant ideologies and agendas. As Sluis and Rubenstein have noted "This disappearance of the camera inside the phone has ensured that even the most banal moments of the day can become a point of photographic reverie, potentially shared instantly." (Rubenstein and Sluis 2008, p.9).

The camera-enabled smartphone has played a significant role in this process of democratisation of photography. According to cultural theorist Celia Lury, contemporary culture can be defined as "Prosthetic Culture." In her book *Prosthetic Cultures* (1998) she asserts that this is due to the abundance of prosthetic objects and technologies that have a significant impact on our identities, social interactions, and our understanding of the world. These prosthetic objects can range from everyday items like clothing and tools to more complex technologies such as phones and computers. Lury also argues that these objects not only facilitate our interactions but also contribute to the formation of our identities. What we wear, use, and engage with become extensions of ourselves, influencing how we present ourselves to others and our perception of our place in society. As posthumanist Cary Wolfe affirms, "...human beings are *prosthetic* beings. What we call 'we' is in fact a multiplicity of relations between 'us' and 'not us', 'inside' and 'outside', organic and non-organic, things 'present' and things 'absent'." (2018, p.358). The smartphone has literally become an extension of our body. It is always connected to a network that defines our interactions, understanding and connections to the rest of the world. It also enables the engagement with and the production of networked images, making them a central practice within our communication with others, as well as the representation of ourselves and the world around us.

⁶⁹ The post photographic is referred to the transition of photography from the analogue to the digital and the overall visual overabundance (Mitchell 1994).

The smartphone and the explosion of social media and the ubiquity of networked spaces created an expansive circulation of digital images, and thus, the network image came into existence. A networked image is not merely a digital image, as described by Katrina Sluis and Daniel Rubenstein (2008), scholars of the networked image who are also part of *The Centre for the Study of the Networked Image*. They affirm that the networked image is a photograph shared on a network participates in a web of relations that include not only what is visible within the image but also metadata, social interactions such as likes, comments, and shares, as well as algorithmic processes that determine its visibility and distribution. Furthermore, an image on a network is never static; its significance and meaning are continuously re-evaluated as it travels through various networks, subject to diverse interpretations, appropriations, or alterations.

Networked images often occupy networked spaces⁷⁰ like social media. Danah boyd, a researcher of social media, explores how adolescents interact with networked spaces. She coined the term “networked publics”⁷¹ in her book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014). This persistence of data changes the dynamics of social interactions, as shared information like photos, likes, and comments can be accessible in perpetuity after they were initially posted. This public status and potential for permanence or circulation and reappropriation is what contributes to the life of networked images and their fluctuating meaning.

⁷⁰ Interconnected and networked digital spaces gave rise to networked cultures, which I use as a term to define online spaces and platforms that online users engage with and use to connect with others, as well as spaces where the circulation of images is a central practice. In the book *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (Jenkins et al. 2013) the concept of “networked culture” is described as an interconnected system of social, technological, and cultural practices that facilitate the wide circulation of content. It refers to a landscape where the audience members are not just passive consumers but active participants in the distribution and interpretation of media. This “networked culture” enables and is enabled by a range of technological platforms and tools but is fundamentally driven by human behaviours and relationships. “Taken together, this set of social and cultural practices, and the related technological innovations which grew up around them, constitute what we call a “networked culture.” (Jenkins et al. 2013, p.12). These practices include the widespread literacy in social networking, the way people are broadly in contact with their networks of friends, family, and acquaintances, and how individuals increasingly interact by sharing meaningful bits of media content. Furthermore, these practices are enabled by and are also shaping technological innovations such as video-sharing platforms, social media sites, and link-sharing tools. All of these elements together make up what Jenkins calls “networked culture,” where content can be easily and widely spread, both by media producers and the audience.

⁷¹ According to boyd (2014) networked publics are public spaces that are defined by networked technologies. Young people often use these spaces in a similar way to how previous generations used physical public spaces like parks and shopping areas. Unlike traditional spaces, where interactions and conversations are temporal and ephemeral, in networked publics, however, information is stored potentially infinitely.



I h8u @Instagram

Figure 42 "I h8u @ Instagram" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Shahreen Vayani (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233085> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The networked image is embedded in a social and cultural environment. Its creator does not solely define its meaning, but rather its meaning is defined by its collective interactions and interpretations (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008). Ideas of representation within photography have been disrupted by computational systems and global capitalism, and in this way, images become complicit in the data-driven economy. While photographs are now commodified data points in a network, they still hold representational value for humans. Therefore, these representational and nonrepresentational aspects co-exist in a complex relationship, shaping contemporary challenges over culture, meaning, and value. Consequently, the networked image transcends the mere representational characteristics of a photograph, and its meaning is shaped through various and complex elements that include its creation, distribution, and consumption within digitally interconnected networked spaces.

Shahreen Vayani's moving image (screenshot can be seen in Figure 42) is made up of disorientating and unstable video shots of what appears to be a field that resembles a computer circuit board, which can be seen as a direct reference to networks, images and exchange of data. A networked image also ultimately lacks stability within its interpretation as it is continuously defined and redefined based on the interaction of human and algorithmic agencies. Vayani positions herself in this piece through her shadow within the networked space, depicted by the grid, which appears to comprise an interplay between what is human and manmade, natural and metaphorically technological. Her work, therefore, evokes the networked image. Vayani's piece suggests that images in networked spaces are forms of calculable data that shape social relations between humans and machines.

Furthermore, the caption of Vayani's work "I hate you @Instagram", is a commentary on young people's ambivalent relationship with social media and the images that are being shared. Young people, as if unconsciously aware of the long-term implications on their identities through the potential permanence of their shared images, engage in the use of ephemeral social media stories that have time-based visibility. This is a trend that was popularised by Snapchat and later adopted by Facebook and Instagram. This temporal circulation of networked images renders them both material and immaterial. They have an inherent permanence through their qualities to act as data and impermanence through their ability to be made invisible. Subsequently, what is made visible and what remains out of sight is also determined by both human and algorithmic factors. While our stories may disappear, their permanence as data will persist through their captions, comments and likes, as well as who interacts with them and their interests, will determine what we see next "...the dialogic nature of interaction in which attention should be paid, not to the appearance of the image on screen" (Dewdney and Sluis 2023, p.27). Therefore, as users, what we choose to give our attention to, and how long for, as well as how we interact with these images, will establish what happens next.

...the rhythms of repetition and recurrence, to the time signatures, to the gaps and pauses, the stuttering, the noise, the immoderate abundance that constitute the image because these are the mechanisms that make it cohere. (Rubinstein and Sluis 2013, p.36)

Consequently, the representational characteristics of an image start to diminish in value compared to how its meaning is mediated and determined by algorithms using it as data points for human interaction, which will ultimately define and determine the value and position of that image. Thus, Vayani's statement "I h&u @Instagram" also relates to the anxieties related to

navigating these likes and 'outrunning' algorithms within social media. Furthermore, the visibility of each post is determined by each interaction and length of pause, which will subsequently predetermine its value. This ultimately means that social media's algorithms are far from unbiased. For example, the Instagram algorithm selects content for a feed based on popularity and relevance in a highly subjective manner, often mirroring pre-existing human biases. Consequently, what are the implications of this bias if social media is one of the primary networked spaces for consuming and disseminating information?

As part of the documentation and reflection for *Who Are These Women?* we set up an Instagram group which was accessible to each of the participants. After a few days, the Instagram algorithm started curating content for that account based on what we collectively engaged with (Figure 43). It created a joint 'portrait' of us as a group based on what it thinks we like. It felt like an echo of fragmented individual identities that would creep up in the curated feed of supposedly 'personalised' algorithmic information. My obsession with dogs and someone else's interest in football was evident. This collective and curated representation of us as a group is significant because it almost functions in a similar way to the photographic portrait, which can create a problematic sense of connection and false understanding of the identity of those it depicts.

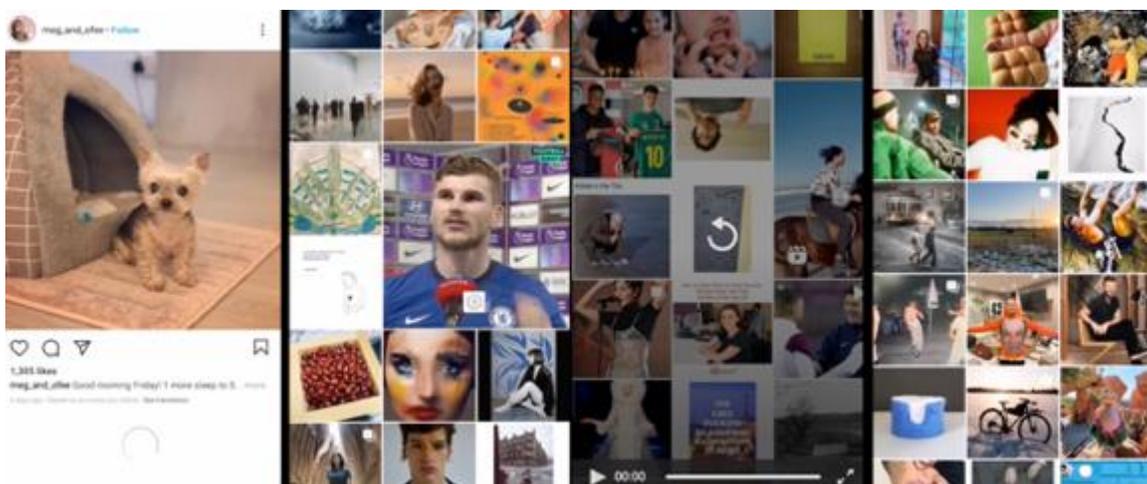


Figure 43 "IG Algorithmic Group Portrait" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233091> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Algorithmic bias within social media platforms can inadvertently contribute to the reinforcement of gender norms. These platforms rely on algorithms to curate content for users, shaping what appears on their feeds. However, if these algorithms favour specific content or interactions based on historical usage patterns, they may inadvertently amplify content that aligns with traditional gender roles, thereby further solidifying the visibility of these norms and visual tropes. This can result in a skewed representation of gender in users' feeds, perpetuating

existing stereotypes and limiting the diversity of perspectives presented. The work of artist Stephanie Kneissl portrays the complex interplay between humans and algorithms in the process of determining the meaning and the life of images and posts in her piece *Stop the Algorithm*. She creates “Three machines that disrupt and manipulate the social media economy built on ratings, followers, likes and retweets.” (Kneissl 2018). By doing this, Kneissl disrupts the algorithm, its potential bias, and the meaning and value of the posts that it simulates to like.

Shahreen Vayani’s artwork titled "Free Self-curated Echo Chamber" (Figure 40), explores the curation and perpetuation of biases and limited diversity of perspectives and information on social media. Her piece also reflects on the idea of the echo chamber that is created through this process. Eli Pariser a scholar, explores the ‘echo chamber’ phenomenon on social media through the concept of the "filter bubble". His book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (2011) discusses how personalised algorithms can create online environments where users are exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, leading to a lack of exposure to diverse viewpoints. Parison suggests further that "filter bubbles" on the internet show us only what we want to see based on what we already believe, which is also implied in Vayani’s title as she refers to the echo chamber being self-curated. This can limit our view of the world and make us more polarised and divided in our opinions. It can also make us less likely to think critically because we're not seeing different viewpoints. This can also further the perpetuation of stereotypes and a binary view of gender.

Shahreen depicts the idea of the ‘echo chamber’ by creating a version of an infinity mirror, which alludes to the pertinent questions she directly asks in her next piece of work in : “What versions of myself are reflected back to me?”. The algorithms that decide what to feed us are mostly designed to keep viewers clicking, so they often favour exciting or dramatic content over balanced information. This can lead to gaps in one’s knowledge gaps. The infinity mirror tricks the mind into seeing countless objects, even when there are only a few. It can conjure an illusion of richness and complexity that disguises scarcity. Eco chambers work similarly to create an illusion of abundant perspectives while effectively reinforcing blind spots. Surrounding ourselves with opinions reflecting our own can make us more attached to our existing beliefs and identities and make it harder to consider other perspectives.



Who do I encounter when I enter the digital space?
How much power do I really have here? What
versions of myself are reflected back to me? Which
of the demons have been created from and out of
myself? If I set them free, how long would they
haunt me? Why does it feel so cold, so sweet, so
vast? Where else can we go?



Figure 44 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Shahreen Vayani, (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233091>
[Accessed 23 November 2023]

Vayani raises the following question in : “How much power do I really have here?”. This question can refer to the idea that our online identities, through the data that is gathered, are also subject to surveillance, commodification, and manipulation, usually by technology-based corporations. “Surveillance Capitalism”, as framed by Shoshana Zuboff, a Harvard scholar, in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019), describes the form of power that takes place through the gathering of personal data. The gathered personal data is not visible and operates in the back end of technology. It has the potential to influence consumer preferences, shape political opinion, evoke and manipulate emotions and influence social dynamics, often without the awareness of the user and how deeply they are being manipulated. The networked image is a primary data source for ‘Surveillance Capitalism’. Its uses can extend beyond advertising and commercial purposes into political and social influence, which directly threatens democracy and society.

Vayani also frames her version of the ‘echo chamber’ on what appears to be a metal gate that is suggestive of incarceration (Figure 40). Thus, one can infer that the echo chamber and this form of manipulation can be perceived as a type of prison or trap that is hard to escape from, which ultimately shapes our understanding of others and ourselves. It also continuously limits our perspectives and understanding of the world and, subsequently, the way we understand and view gender. For instance, if users exhibit a preference for content that adheres to traditional norms, such as images of women in specific roles or engaging in discussions pertaining to gender-stereotyped topics, the algorithm may create a self-reinforcing feedback loop. This loop will consistently promote and recommend such content, leading to an echo chamber that shapes and amplifies these gender norms over time. Consequently, our beliefs about women are continuously reinforced. Conversely, when social media algorithms prioritise certain types of content, they also inadvertently censor content that may resist traditional gender stereotypes. Nikki Robson’s work (Figure 46) raises important questions about what is made visible and what is being censored. She asks the following pertinent question, “What should we really be censoring?” Women’s bodies are often censored based on criteria which are not the same for male bodies. For example, women’s bodies are often sexualised and censored, as Instagram’s algorithm will take down photos of female nudity, whilst men’s bodies are not subjected to the same censorship.

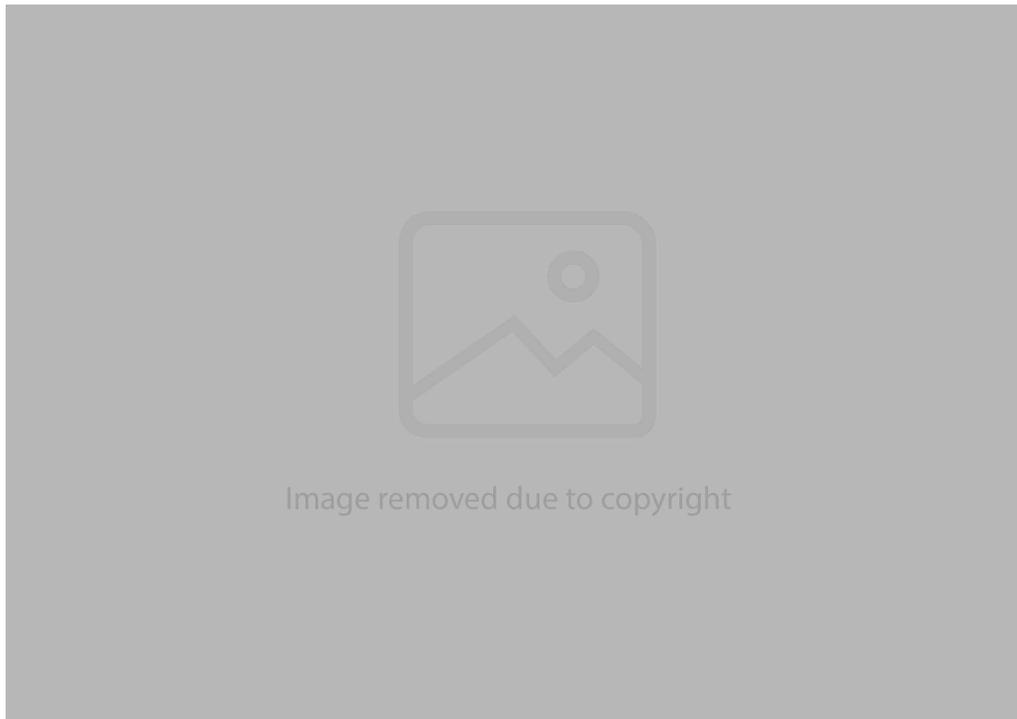


Figure 45 The poster for the film *Madres Paralelas*, designed by Javier Jaen with comments by the designer, 2021, by Pedro Almodóvar <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/vos/cine/instagram-pidio-disculpas-por-haber-censurado-el-poster-de-la-nueva-pelicula-de-almodovar/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Instagram had to make a public apology to Pedro Almodóvar⁷² for censoring a poster of his film *Madres Paralelas*, which depicted a lactating nipple (Figure 45) made to look like a tear coming out of an eye the designer of the poster proceeded to state in an interview: “A company like Instagram tells me my work is dangerous, that people shouldn’t see it, that it’s pornographic. How many people are they telling that their body is bad, that their body is dangerous?” (Associated Press 2021). Events like these have contributed to the start of a movement called “Free the Nipple” across Instagram with a dedicated account @freethenipple, which aims to resist the bias of algorithms that create a disparity between gendered bodies and how they move in the world and are depicted through images.

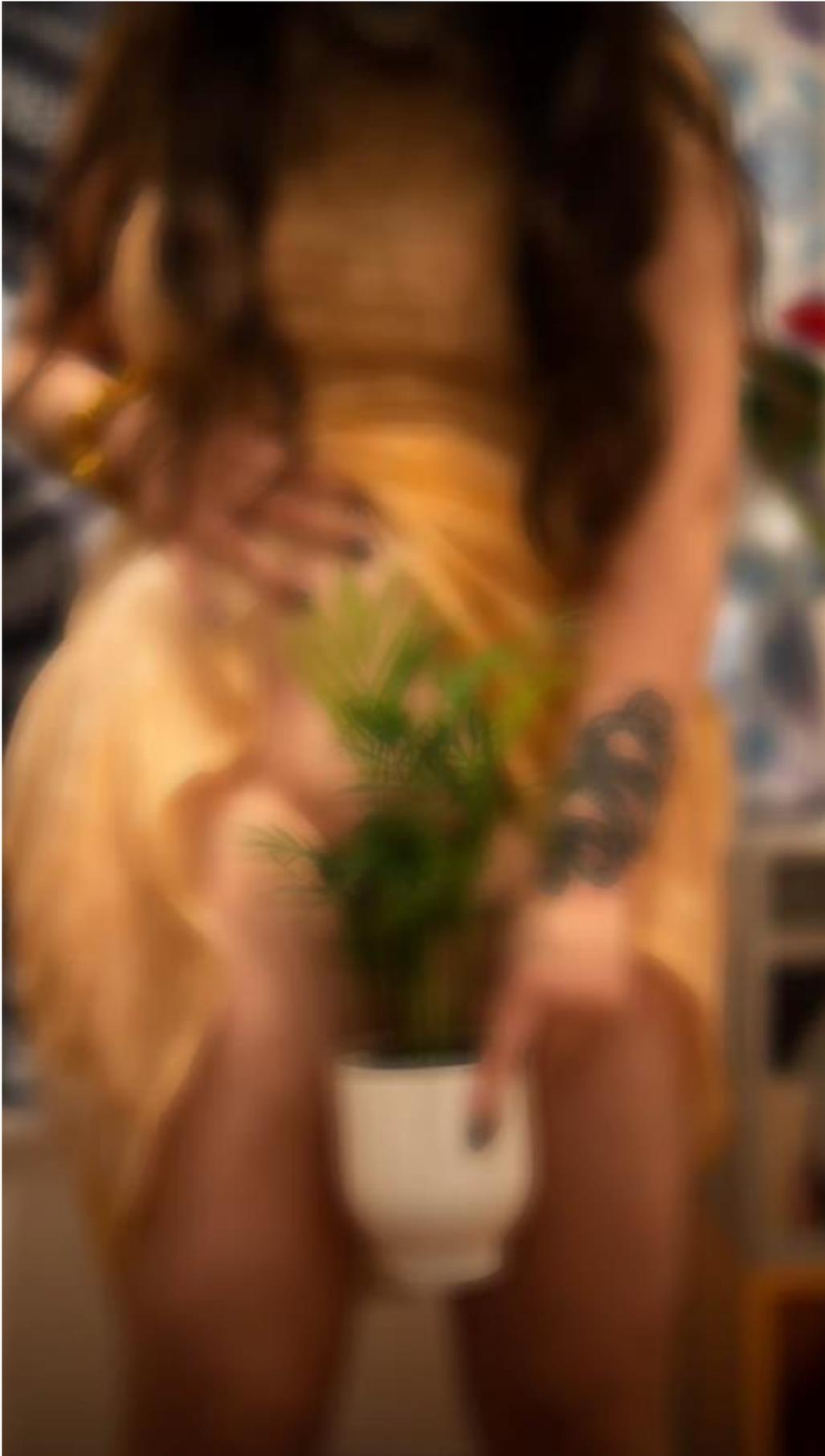
Robson’s photograph (Figure 46), which accompanies her question, depicts what appears as a female body that is semi-nude and has a cloth that does not allow the woman’s face to be exposed. In this way, she expands her question to whether a face that conforms to traditional beauty standards is less uncomfortable or sexualised in comparison to a naked female body and which of the two actually requires censorship.

⁷² Pedro Almodóvar is a Spanish film director and producer



Figure 46 Untitles as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Nikki Robson (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233090> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

In the same vein, Alma Silva's work in Figure 47 explores this notion further through one of her moving images that addresses the idea of censorship of her body in networked spaces. Her image, which was not particularly revealing, was taken down from a completely private account, which the young women were set up with to use as private digital sketchbooks to develop their work. The women's work was blocked and thus censored across the board, even within the password-protected private spaces that were set up specifically for them. Thus, symbolically, their bodies were censored also from themselves by an algorithm. In this way, further fortifying the idea that our bodies do not entirely belong to us.



 padlet

Hi, Alma

We have removed the following attachment uploaded by you for violating our content policy:



Padlet's Content Policy: <https://padlet.com/about/content>

Please note that we may suspend your account altogether if you continue to violate our policy again.

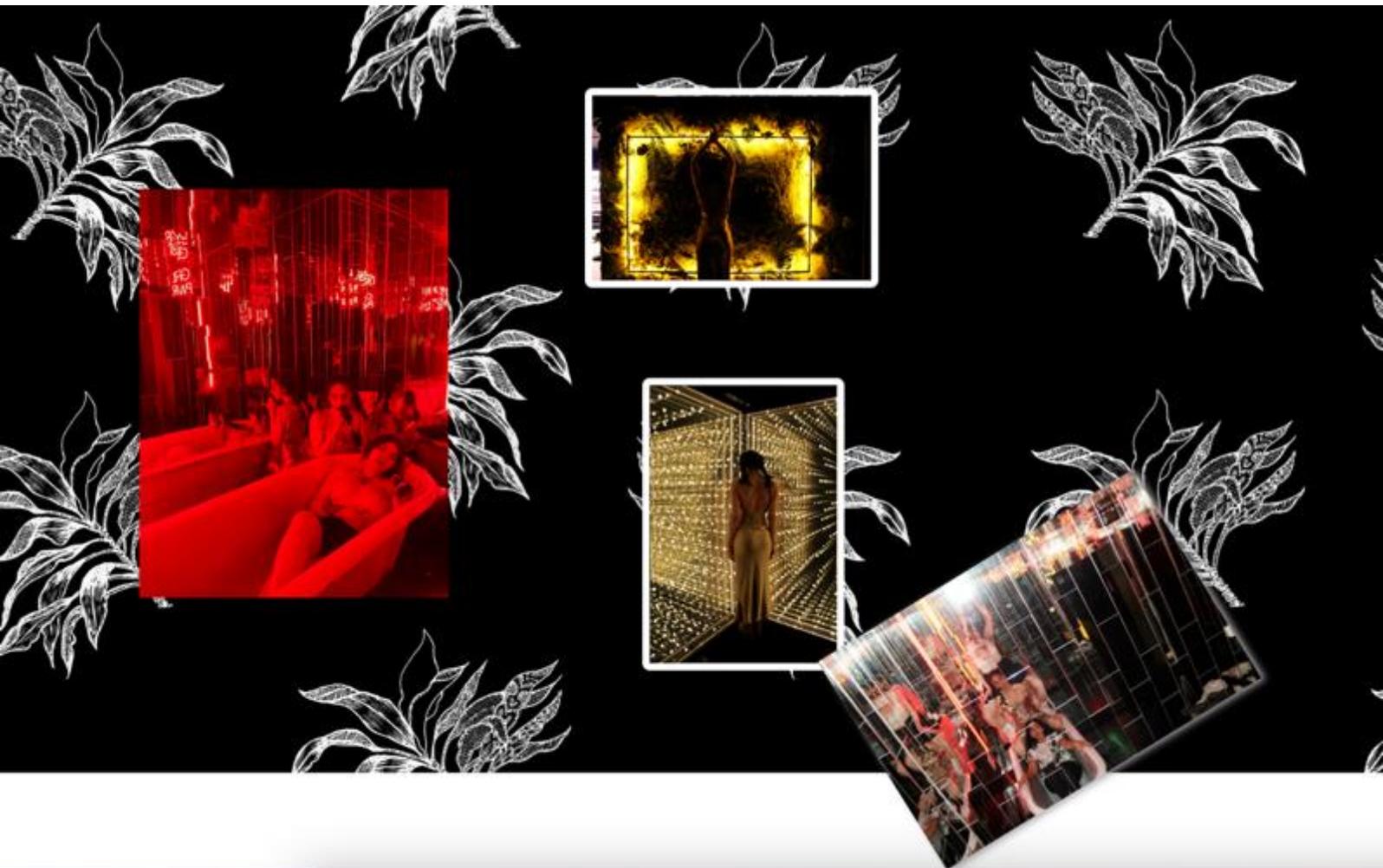
If you'd like to challenge this violation, you can reply to this email.

Padlet Content Safety Team

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Figure 47 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alma Silva, (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233063> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The Commodification of Femininity and the Image



Future capitalism

I feel like the documenting of our digital selves has reached a fever pitch, and capitalism has responded by commodifying our image and selling it back to us. This commodification of the self I feel also extends to the art world.

I visited a space, "IKONO" in Madrid, opposite the contemporary art museum. Its name translates in English to "icon". It was one of the many 'selfie' museums cropping up all around the globe, frequented predominantly by women, where we become the art. The impact of this digital ego being the centrepiece of so many spaces should not be underestimated.

Figure 48 Untitled as part of Who Are These Women?, 2021, by Alma Silva (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233063> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

As a teenager in the 1990s I was bombarded by images of emaciated women – from Disney princesses to ‘heroin chic’ fashion models to Barbie dolls. These images still define my sense of body aesthetics and play a significant role in shaping my perception of my body, even though I knew on some level that this was only an image attainable by the chosen few, predominantly stars and models, a distant image perpetuated by the media. As a photographer, I later became aware that lighting, post-production and printing played a significant role in the appearance of the subject. However, with the rise of social media, things became more complicated. Images of beauty standards that existed in the media were no longer depictions of bodies from a world that most people do not belong to. On social media, photographs were suddenly shared and created by potentially everyone. Therefore, the level of comparison could no longer be perceived as us (the average person) against them (models and stars), but as me against everyone else. Consequently, how identities are shaped, understood and constructed through the consumption of networked images under neoliberalism, particularly for women, has become increasingly more complex.

The increase in individual responsibility under neoliberalism⁷³, framed as a form of empowerment, can be observed in postfeminist ideals where a woman’s agency is promoted as something attainable and complete. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff explore the complex intersection between postfeminism and neoliberalism in their book *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (2013). The book uncovers how postfeminist ideas often align with neoliberal ideologies, prioritising individual agency and empowerment while potentially masking persistent structural inequalities. Their research explores how neoliberalism shapes personal identity, examining how values such as self-enterprise, individualism, and commercial ideals are communicated through media narratives and impact individuals’ self-perception and sense of value. Media representations of young girls may depict them as empowered individuals who are capable of making choices and pursuing their goals, but this narrative can shape girls’ perceptions of themselves as capable and active agents in their own lives while there is a market-driven agenda to sell more products or other commercial gains.

⁷³ Neoliberalism emphasises personal responsibility for one’s circumstances. People attribute success solely based on their effort while blaming failures on personal shortcomings. Profit-driven values like competition and consumerism affect one’s self-worth. This can obscure systemic inequalities related to race, class, and gender, creating barriers to success. Recognizing these factors is essential to understand complex societal issues.

Such postfeminist undertones, for example, can also be observed in the highly acclaimed recently released film *Barbie*⁷⁴ directed by Greta Gerwig. On one hand, the film has a strong feminist message for which it receives a highly positive critique. However, on the other hand, what is hidden behind this message is Mattel's (the company that produces the Barbie doll) success in turning a no longer profitable and dying representation of a woman in the face of Barbie by re-inventing it and subverting its original meaning, thereby tapping into the buying power of its newly found audiences. In doing so, capitalism manages to co-opt and profit from even those who do not buy into the image of the postfeminist emancipated women and those who proclaim themselves as feminists. Furthermore, despite this new celebrated feminist image of Barbie, she still wears pink and still looks exactly the same as the doll I aspired to look like as a child, only now she obsesses over having cellulite. Furthermore, she is positioned in the company of a diverse-looking range of Barbies, and yet the 'original and stereotypical' Barbie is still the main protagonist that is most desirable. Thus, the signifier is precisely the same, but the signified is now reappropriated, and yet the feminist viewer has been 'moved'. This begs the question what has really been achieved other than more profits for Mattel and the perpetuation of feminine beauty ideals, as well as the perpetuation of the idea of gender as binary. This postfeminist approach to women's empowerment can be viewed within photographic representations of women and products within social media, as well as through the images that women consequently share of themselves.

Feminist ideological tensions can also emerge when women choose to represent themselves on social media. Some image-based media representations perpetuate stereotypes and narrow representations of gender, leading to discussions about accurate or diverse portrayals of women. The rise of digital media and social platforms has provided space for alternative narratives and marginalised voices; women are using these platforms to share their stories, challenge norms, and create more inclusive content. However, there is a rise of postfeminist representations of women who embrace traditional femininity and proclaim themselves as liberated and free from patriarchal norms, as well as free to attain any of their goals. Either of these image-based representations can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles despite postfeminism's claims to challenge them. Depicting women who conform to traditional beauty standards or embody stereotypical masculine traits can be contradictory to the goal of breaking down gender norms. Furthermore, shared images might showcase a few successful individuals from marginalised backgrounds as a way to demonstrate empowerment. However, this can

⁷⁴ More information about the production and cast of the film can be found on IMDB <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1517268/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

lead to tokenism, where the experiences of a few are seen as representative of the entire group, ignoring broader systemic challenges.

In a neoliberal context, individuals also often feel the need to 'perform' their identities in ways that align with marketable traits and skills. This can lead to the cultivation of a particular self-presentation on social media that reflects neoliberal ideals of success and thus becomes a form of self-branding. Nikki Robson's work in Figure 49 alludes to this in her caption: "Wonder at identity and personal brand in the working world with its tricky algorithms that torture the individual and rouse a 'unity' with no agenda other than profit". It could be understood as neoliberalism reassuring individuals to view themselves as entrepreneurs of their own lives and encouraging the commodification of personal experience, to which women are particularly susceptible.



Figure 49 Untitled as part of Who Are These Women?, 2021, by Nikki Robson, (Research Participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233090>
[Accessed 23 November 2023]

Consequently, networked spaces like social media reinforce the desire for the commodification of personal experience and make it omnipresent and more unattainable than ever before. This

serves to establish further societal expectations rather than release us from them. Therefore, the difficulty lies in being critical of these images and cultures, while simultaneously understanding their interdependent relationship in shaping women's identities and ambitions. The pressure on young women to fulfil multiple roles isn't just a personal struggle but becomes a publicly commodified experience by turning women's lives into sharable content, which is to be consumed and scrutinised with no recognition of the potentially precarious conditions, including the economic, social and emotional labour, that underly these polished online personas. "The network image requires the unpaid labour of billions of people who spend increasing amounts of their daily lives online and, in doing so, provide data." (Dewdney and Sluis 2023, p.26). Thereby not only forcing them into engaging with the hidden labour of curating their online personas but also to participate in a system that monetises these daily activities and interactions, while their precarity in the process increases.

This creates a tension between presenting an authentic version of one's self and strategically curating a digital persona. On social network sites, people often make conscious choices about what aspects of their lives to share, how to portray themselves, and how to connect with others (Papacharissi 2010). This process involves creating a digital identity that aligns with one's desired self-presentation, and it needs to be constructed in such a way that it resonates and caters for a specific audience that will generate further likes and contribute to the success of that person's individual identity. Artist Amalia Ulman's project *Excellences & Perfections* (Figure 50) in which she creates a fictional Instagram identity that she performs herself, addresses some of these tensions. Through creating a fake online persona, Ulman also offers a feminist analysis that critiques the ways women's identities are constructed, commodified, and controlled by societal norms, consumerism, and the digital landscape. Through her subversive performance, Ulman exposes the complexities of female representation, self-expression, and the broader implications of gender expectations within society.

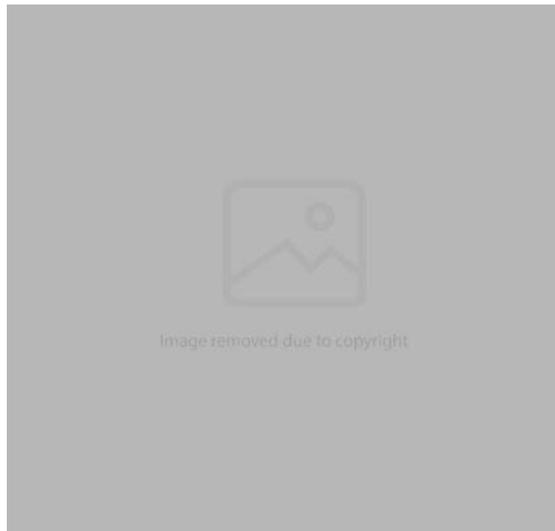


Figure 50 Excellence and Perfection, 2014, by Amelia Ulman 2014 <https://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Alma Silva's work in (Figure 48), which was created as a result of her visiting the selfie museum "IKONO" in Madrid, directly addresses the performative tension between authenticity and commodification of the self by stating in her caption "The impact of this digital ego being the centrepiece of so many spaces should not be underestimated". The use of the term 'digital ego' raises questions in terms of how accurate one's online representation is or whether it is generally a more polished, idealised version of one's life, which has the potential to create a dissonance between one's online presence and one's real life. As seen in the same Figure 48, the images that constitute this body of work by Silva represent the glamorous image that women often seek to achieve in their online profiles. Such polished images can also play a central role in this process by promoting consumer goods and reinforcing stereotypes that increase systemic inequalities and oppression. For example, some idealistic narratives through images are linked to consumer choices. The idea that emancipation can be attained through purchasing beauty products or lifestyles can reinforce consumerist values and divert attention from addressing deeper systemic issues.

Alma proceeds to tell us, "It was one of the many 'selfie' museums cropping up all around the globe, frequented predominantly by women, where we become the art.". These selfie museums are a recent phenomenon that takes the commodification of self a step further by capitalising further on selfie culture and people's desires to document their lives online. "Frequented predominantly by women" directly addresses questions of female representation and the practice of the selfie. According to findings of the study *Selficity* headed by Lev Manovich, a scholar on digital art and culture, in every city that was analysed, there were

“significantly more women” selfies than men selfies (Manovich n.d.). Alma’s work and statement open up a discussion on selfie culture and it being a gendered experience. Her work also questions why women are more attracted to these spaces and what this means in terms of digital culture and the commodification of the image of their bodies.

The objectification of the female body⁷⁵ has become a significant practice on social media. One of the defining features of these platforms has become the promise of self-realisation through the sharing of images, an endeavour that usually remains unpaid. The engagement in creative digital labour and self-representation as a form of commodified representation of self has become an issue for young women in particular. The burden of aesthetic labour falls disproportionately on women, who are subjected to a range of beauty norms and expectations that men are usually not. The neoliberal emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility also means that failure to conform to these norms is often seen as a personal failing rather than the result of structural inequalities. The book *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (Elias et al. 2017) brings a collection of essays exploring how curated online personas can have various adverse effects on women, including mental health, confidence, and impact their professional opportunities. The abstract of the book, as seen on the Springer website, states: “It’s contrived perfection made to get attention” as posted by the young teenager Essena O’neill who closed down here extremely profitable account with a huge following because she “could no longer tolerate the shameless manipulation of her images and the painful costs of ‘self-promotion’”. Furthermore, a recent article in the Economist from 2022 “The Economics of Thinness”, starts with the following phrase “It is economically rational for ambitious women to try as hard as possible to be thin”, and then proceeds to tell us that based on research “The penalty for an obese woman is significant, costing her about 10% of her income.”(The Economist 2022). Thus, the presentation of women’s bodies, whether in real life or within images, can be considered to have financial value.

Moreover, Katrina Sluis’s states, “Within neoliberal culture we are all invited to endlessly re-invent ourselves, turn our life into a work of art and, in the process, make ourselves transparent to software and to each other.” (2016, p.285). Similarly, Silva tells us “where we become the art” (Figure 48), which questions the commodification of self through the female image, and it

⁷⁵ Feminist scholars and activists have long critiqued media’s portrayal of women. The Bechdel Test, for example, examines whether a work of fiction includes at least two named women who talk to each other about something other than a man. It highlights gender imbalances in film narratives (O’Meara 2016). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier Laura Mulvey’s seminal work on the ‘male gaze’ and the objectification of women in cinema and how it caters for a male audience has been highly influential in feminist thought and the studies of media (Mulvey 1975).

alludes that the selfie museum flips the traditional notion of an art museum, where the visitor is no longer a passive observer but becomes the artwork themselves. It goes back to the idea that people are both consumers (paying for the museum experience) and producers (creating content that has social and potentially economic value). Furthermore, Silva also notes, “I feel like the documenting of our digital selves has reached a fever pitch, and capitalism has responded by commodifying our image and selling it back to us.”. She raises concerns about the levels of involvement of young people in documenting their lives and the curation of their digital personas.

Silva addresses the very pertinent question of the commodification of young women’s images, and perhaps the most critical statement she makes is “capitalism selling our image back to us” (Figure 48). It turns the performance of our digital personas through images into something that can be monetised, with social and economic implications, including the digital labour required to produce such images. This implies a contradiction as we share our networked images seemingly for free; however, through engaging in the networked economy, we are also indirectly spending money on them, like Silva and her friends who spend their money in the selfie museum. Neoliberal capitalism finds new ways to commodify the representation of women through various forms of cultural expression, and with the democratisation of photography within networked spaces like social media, the networked image becomes complicit in this process. The image is no longer just a symbolic or cultural representation. It becomes a commodity that can be instrumentalised as well as financialised. Thereby, the way meaning is produced through images is increasingly informed by capitalist modes of commercialisation and extraction of data, both in the process of production and consumption of images. This commodification also challenges the conventional humanist understanding of the photograph as representational beyond something other than itself. A photograph is no longer there just for human eyes to see but serves as data points for machine vision and interactions. This dual nature of the image is at the heart of contemporary struggles over meaning, culture, and value. Dealing with this paradox is essential for understanding the current political and cultural implications of how images circulate and acquire meaning in networked digital spaces.

The depiction of the young woman in the bathtub under red light, as seen in Silva’s work in Figure 48, can symbolise objectification and desire. The image of a woman portrayed as vulnerable, sensual, and submissive is a visual trope, and such imagery can perpetuate the idea that women's bodies exist for the pleasure and consumption of others. The glamour settings of these images can be seen as a critical response to capitalism and its role in commodifying

femininity and beauty. Furthermore, the portrayal of a bathtub also raises questions about the collapse of boundaries between private and public spaces, a central theme within social media imagery. Moreover, the selfie museum offers specific spaces, including a toilet and bathroom, against a glamorous backdrop of lights and colours, potentially glorifying the stereotypical bathroom mirror selfie, which can also be seen performed in Ulman's work in Figure 50. Additionally, "Taking a selfie is a form of place expression, meaning that selfies are about the placement of one's self in a place at a time." (Hess 2015, p.1636). As Burbridge notes "Identity becomes increasingly performative and necessarily image-based in such a context, with success measured not by 'an individual's achievements in the public interest', but according to the degree of acquired visibility and public exposure'" (2020, p.28), in this way, Alma's images in the bathtub also raise questions about what is made visible and the selfie's relationship to place, visibility, authenticity and performance.

Identity formation in networked spaces is full of tension between authentic selves and their commodification, where users are both consumers and producers of their self-image. Our identities are ultimately mediated by market-driven forces and conditioned by social norms, where social media platforms have become spaces for the performance and construction of identity, often underpinned by neoliberal ideologies, which include commodification and self-branding through networked images. While these platforms also offer opportunities for counter-visual narratives and marginalised perspectives, they also perpetuate traditional gender roles and other systemic inequalities that can be magnified through the 'echo chamber' effect, which limits one's perspective and makes the freedom to express one's self a double-edged sword.

As we strive to represent ourselves in new and critical ways, we must acknowledge that these counter-narratives may still contain internalised stereotypes and visual tropes within the images that are produced. Digital identities, while offering glimpses of emancipation, might also be internalised and entangled in the very systems of oppression they seek to dismantle. Therefore, in this digital age, these online images and self-representations become less a mirror of who one is and more a tapestry of who we wish to be, who society expects women to be, and the marketable value these images hold, blurring the lines between the authentic self and its commodified and objectified other.

Alexandra Haslam's work in Figure 51 which asks the question, "Are you still watching?" which visually represents a screenshot of her images reflected in the Netflix series she has been watching, thus blurring the lines between who she is and what she has previously 'seen' by

asking the question how much of who we are is based on what we have previously visually consumed? As signs and symbols within images lose their connection to a fixed reality like in the proposition of Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1988), the notion of a single, immutable representation of an 'authentic self' becomes more complex. Identity, then, potentially becomes a negotiable concept, susceptible to the influences of a wide array of representations that don't necessarily have a basis in any objective reality.

Consequently, visual content, consisting of networked images and videos shared on social media, significantly impacts how people perceive gender. When platforms display visuals that conform to traditional gender roles, like showing women in domestic settings and men in positions of authority, users may internalise these depictions. As a result, they may unconsciously replicate these stereotypes in their own posts, images and interactions, perpetuating the same gender norms they encounter online. This type of visual reinforcement can create a cycle where users not only consume but also create content and images that align with established gender roles.

Overall, the visual works created by the participants in *Who Are These Women?* demonstrate the transformative potential of PCVL in fostering critical reflection, even when individuals are unconsciously driven to engage in the automatic reproduction of visual tropes and stereotypes. This is achieved by actively engaging with and examining these elements through critical reflection and discussion during the image creation process. Through the production, interpretation, and collective dialogue surrounding images, their work presents counter-narratives that challenge dominant visual representations. From Alexandra Haslam's critique of mediated identity in "Are You Still Watching?" to Alma Silva's interrogation of enduring stereotypes in "Stereotypes Refuse to Die Out," each piece of work reflects a deep engagement with PCVL's principles of reflexivity, collaboration, and critical agency. The photographic work of these young women goes beyond documenting their personal experiences; it challenges mainstream portrayals of femininity, domesticity, and identity, allowing for more nuanced and situated interpretations of their lives and perspectives. Furthermore, by emphasising participant agency and collaborative group discussions, PCVL enabled participants to reclaim their visual narratives, turning their creative expressions into acts of critical resistance. Together, these counter-narratives showcase the potential of participatory photography, facilitated by utilising PCVL, to redefine how identities and stories are understood, represented, shared, and interpreted in contemporary visual culture.

Are you still watching?

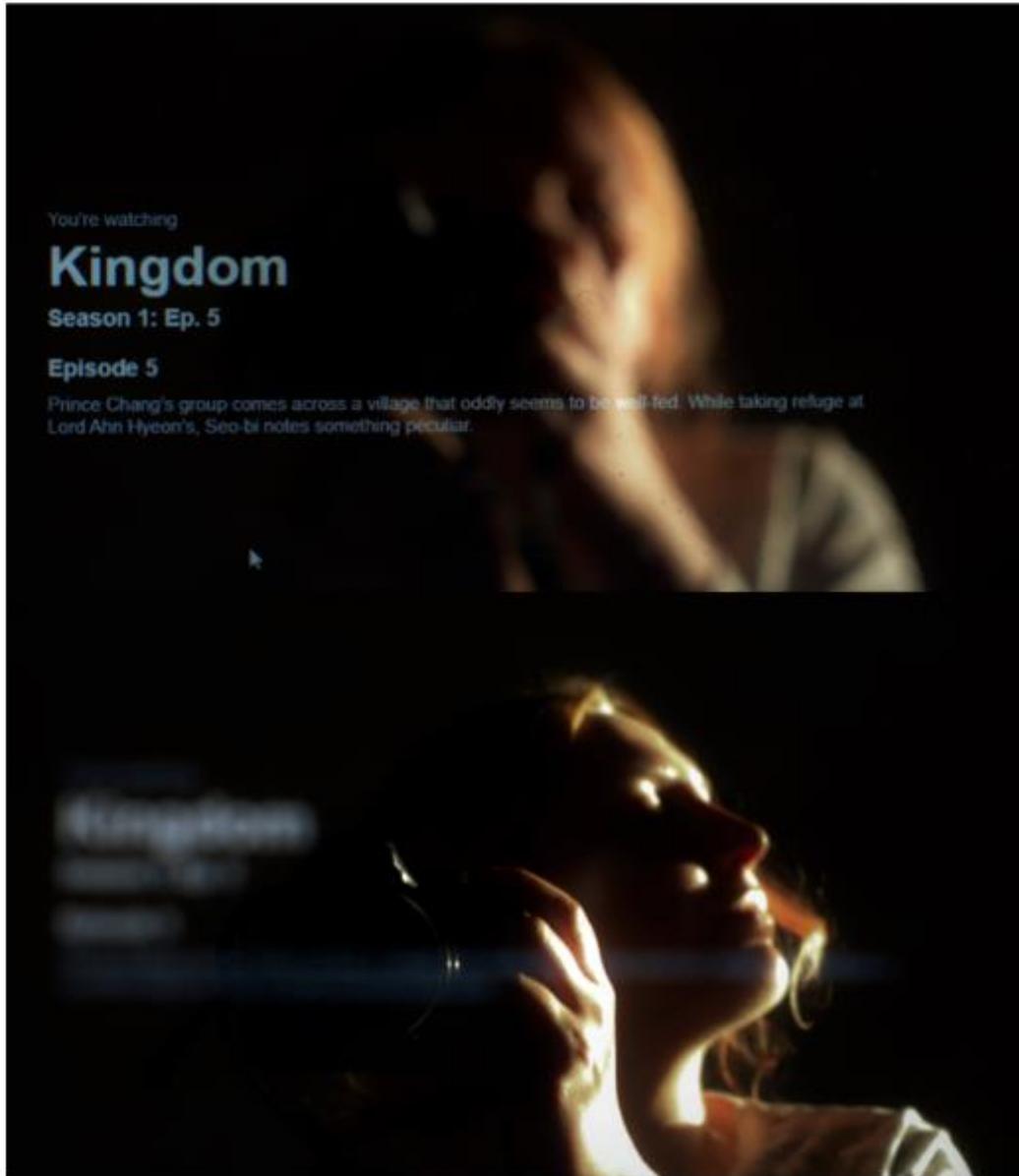


Figure 51 "Are You Still Watching?" as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam, (Research participant) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Discussion and Reflection on Participatory Photography and Networked Spaces

I reviewed the critical underpinnings of socially engaged art in relationship to process in Chapter 1. I highlighted the importance of visual ethnography, relational aesthetics, dialogic art, community photography, and photography for wellbeing and offered a review of some of the key collaborative photography artistic practices. In Chapter 2, I propose a model of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy as a key methodological underpinning for this research, which uses the reciprocal structure to guide the discussion. I will now expand on these ideas, make new connections, and reflect on critical elements as understood and embodied by this practice. This exploration will be supported by the following two iterations of the reimagined reciprocal structures, serving as a representation and a metaphor that both dismantle and assemble these propositions and reflections. I will explore the implications of the screen as a mediator, with references to theoretical and practical examples, and within this participatory photography research that utilises PCVL and is delivered within networked spaces. I will finally explore facilitation, digital exclusion and reflect on ethics, power, authorship, visibility and remuneration.

As the project progressed and began to take shape, my excitement for the reciprocal structure grew even further. I started to notice the structure appearing in other places, further fuelling my enthusiasm for its significance. By chance, I had already captured the second important digital iteration of this structure in relation to the project when I was attempting to document the *Who Are These Women?* workshops, which were taking place online. Documenting a process of engagement is a dilemma often faced by participatory photography practitioners as there are a lot of ethical concerns that need to be taken into consideration, such as protecting participants' identities and not intruding on the process of engagement through surveillance by recording with video or audio throughout the sessions. In documenting something that is of a performative nature, the documentation has the potential to become an artwork in its own right.

As proposed here, my documentation is part of my artistic contribution to the exhibition and the work created. It represents the process we undertook and its specificities, as I understood them. It does not necessarily represent the group as a whole. It is a visual

reflection which allows me to channel my thinking with it and through it. The exhibition layout and these documentation details have been agreed upon with the group. However, I was the one most invested in the documentation, and the insertion of my documented work as an artist and facilitator inevitably raises further questions on power, visibility and authorship and thus requires complete transparency.

I was faced with the challenge of how to document the online version of the workshops, which were taking place on a site that is dematerialised and disembodied. I had previously established a routine for documenting the participatory process. I would capture the occupied space and the marks our presence left within it. This created a sense of presence and resulted in a piece of work that attempted to provide a glimpse of the process while retaining the required anonymity. This approach to documentation was effectively carried out for the pilot workshops (a detailed account of which can be reviewed in Appendix A, including the documentation video). The apparent solution for the documentation of the online workshops would have been to record the video conferencing sessions, which I knew would not adequately represent the process and interactions that took place within this new online version of the workshops. Recording the sessions would have also significantly impacted the group dynamic, so I chose not to do that. Consequently, I engaged in various forms of experimentation, where I would record things around me or engage in other screen-based recordings that would relate to how I interpreted the experience of each session.

Screen interactions became central to the documentation process. One of these attempts involved a video feedback loop recording of an external camera looking at the screen of its projection through swirling the camera, which resulted in a depiction of a digital reciprocal structure made up of the camera looking at itself (more on the meaning of this will be explored later in this section). Ironically, this digital version of the reciprocal structure, seen in Figure 54, became the most authentic visual representation of the original structure in architectural design. This serendipitous discovery solidified my excitement and the decision for the reciprocal structure to represent and stand in for aspects of the online process. I will use this digital version of the reciprocal structure to discuss the online nature of the workshops and the implications of working entirely remotely in this chapter.

Participatory Photography and Networked Spaces

The main part of this participatory photography project was meant to be set up with some adjustments that will be made based on the lessons learned during the pilot study (information on the pilot study can be found in Appendix A), utilising a hybrid format of in-person workshops using social media platforms and mobile phones. Based on the learning from the pilots, the following adjustments were to be made: an increased recruitment contingency for young people; shorter sessions to cater for the reduced attention span in young people; an adjusted use of technology and a revised image repository; an improved and tighter recruitment process and criteria. However, at the planning stages of the workshops at the start of 2020, we found ourselves in a global COVID-19 pandemic, which required entirely new ways of thinking about the methodology and process, which heavily relies on the use of images and interactive activities, as well as the relational aspects of human connections. How was this even going to be possible in this new format? As far as this research was concerned, it presented challenges but also possibilities for pushing the research further.

Connecting through a screen was normalised in an unprecedented way during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many engaged in interactive games, family quizzes and social virtual meals and drinks with colleagues and friends. Isolation for some seemed to be a welcome distraction and a time for introspection - a way to live the dream life and step off the 'treadmill', as well as spend quality time with loved ones. For many others, isolation was a privilege that they did not have or a great source of suffering and pain because of the loneliness it introduced. Many more had to endure or be displaced due to complex relationships they could no longer avoid, and some could sadly barely scrape a living. In contrast, others had to find a way to juggle remote work and homeschooling their children effectively. I have probably missed many more experiences that I did not witness. However, one thing could be said with utmost certainty: everyone was impacted in one way or another by this experience. Undoubtedly, for those of us who had access to technology, the screen became a lifeline through which we were able to connect to others. This solidified further the presence of technology within our daily lives and introduced new and unexpected opportunities.

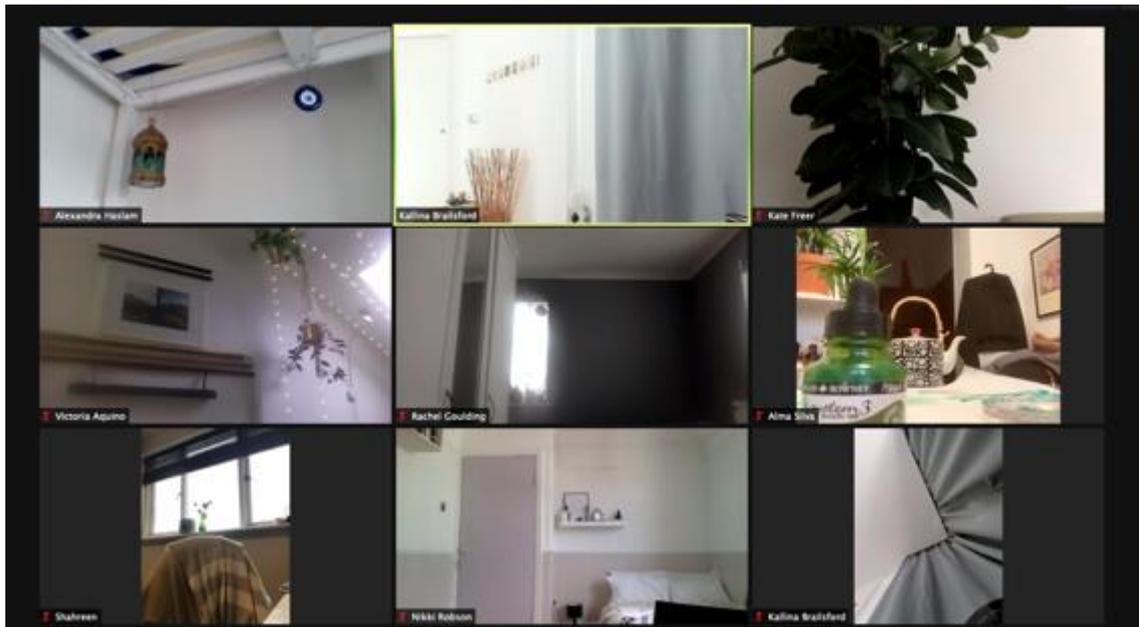


Figure 52 Screenshot from the *Who Are These Women?* workshops, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

The world was now trying to adjust and make sense of these new forms of virtual interaction through video conferencing tools, which exploded very quickly at the start of the pandemic. Therefore, video conferencing technology became the obvious choice for engaging with the participants as part of this research for the duration of the workshops. Based on this, algorithms, data exchange, and networked cultures became even more significant to this research than I had initially anticipated. Inevitably, this research, being conducted almost entirely under lockdown, also becomes about the screen as a mediator and a tool for engagement, which COVID-19 significantly accelerated.

At the start of the pandemic, photographers were forced to rethink the format and framework of their work and started to consider new forms of remote collaborations. Therefore, new forms of remote engagement began to emerge. The project *I am here, and you are where you are*, by artist Nikola Tamindzic⁷⁶, was started at the very beginning of the pandemic and included collaborative portraits done remotely via Zoom, Facetime, Skype and even Instagram. In an interview with Tamindzic, he states, “There is vulnerability and lack of control that is really conducive to doing an honest portrait...It’s about both sides surrendering a little bit of control.” (Djudjic 2020). By making photographers relinquish part of their control over the final image, remote ways of working forced them to address some of the power discrepancies between the subject and photographer. At the same time, it pushed the subject to participate in the decision-making process of their own representation. Remote engagement in this way

⁷⁶ The project can be seen on the artist’s website <https://www.nikolatamindzic.com/coronadiaries> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

prompted photographers to reconsider their practices and adopt a more collaborative framework. Therefore, the screen acting as a mediator introduced the potential to transform the nature of these interactions.

How technology and remote engagement altered practitioners' routines was also evident in the planning of *Who Are These Women?*. This form of human interaction mediated by a screen presented questions on the impact of these connections and, therefore, the nature of collaboration and photography within them. A collaborative practice is founded on the premise that it requires human interaction and connection; thus, the adjustments were significant and felt unthinkable to begin with.

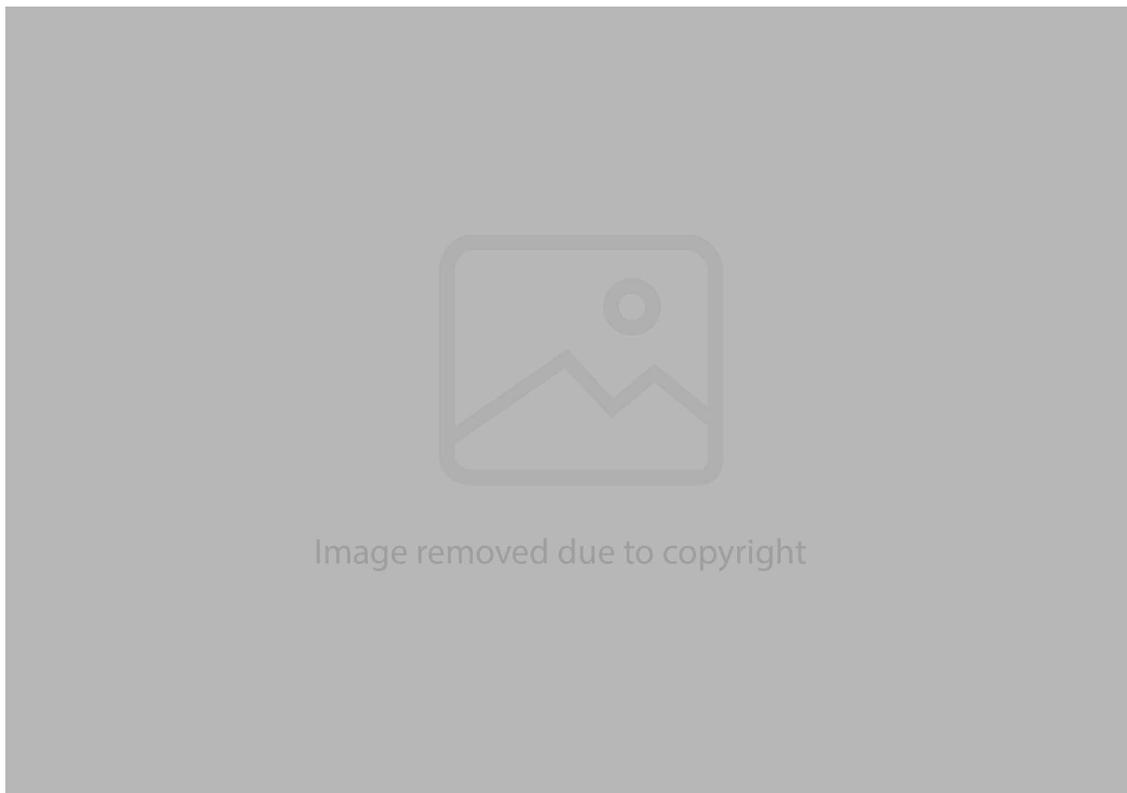
Other socially engaged practitioners not already working in a networked framework also sought alternative ways of conducting their collaborations. An example of this is Susan Meiselas' project *Travessia*⁷⁷ (Figure 53). In an interview about her project, Meiselas describes her initial concerns: "The first question as a photographer is how can I even begin to imagine a project if I can't be present" (Meiselas and Matthews 2021). She concludes that her collaborations usually involve encounters with people and a slow progression of these relationships. The only way she could see this happening was to have those encounters live via video conferencing tools. Meiselas raises a critical and pertinent question: "Is it possible to traverse - across time, space and various technologies - in order to develop personal relationships during a global pandemic?" (Meiselas 2020). Her statement summarises some of the initial challenges faced by practitioners considering engaging with remote collaborative work.

Meiselas' dilemma also inevitably concerned the development and set-up of *Who Are These Women?*. For those of us who do not hold the artistic standing of Meiselas, an additional hurdle presented itself in whether participants would be willing to engage in this form of interaction in the first place. After significant adjustments were made to the recruitment process, it turned out that there were many willing participants to engage with the project remotely. This meant that the adjustments extended far beyond the screen, imposing a different form of interaction to the process and extended to the planning and the nature of the sessions, the types of

⁷⁷ *Travessia* is a project that explores what shapes contemporary black life in the city of Porto in Portugal. Meiselas began her project by collaborating with multigenerational members of the community that were guiding her virtually through the streets of Porto. She also worked with local scholars and researchers through mobile phones and Zoom. The final work involved screengrab photographs created via Zoom as well as images made by the collaborators which were people living in these communities. The final exhibition at the Photography Biennale '21 in Porto of this project consists of material and immaterial artefacts and augmented reality prompts activated through mobile phones to mitigate any spread of the virus by using headphones and other contact-based equipment at the exhibition (Meiselas 2020).

possible engagement, the recruitment process (which ultimately defines the kind of people that were able to partake) and the way the work is exhibited and subsequently received. While full of opportunities, these changes required months of planning and consideration of the limitations, ethical concerns and potential pitfalls.

Despite my concerns and those that Meiselas initially raised on the viability of remote engagement for her project, *Who Are These Women?*, like *Travessia*, was ultimately a success in being able to recruit participants and conduct the project. Therefore, the opportunity for remote collaboration indeed opened up new possibilities for practitioners, and echoing her words again, managed to transcend “space and time”. However, remote projects like these raise questions related to the quality of these connections and their ethical implications, as well as access to participation and the role of digital exclusion, which I explore further in this chapter.



Caption in English: This is where a man and a child had a train accident. He was going to visit Rio Bom with his 3-year old son so they could spend time together, and he took the kid. When the train came, it hit the father, and the father threw his son to the side, as if to say: “If I die, my son will not.” When he pushed his son to the side, he hit his head on the rocks. He was in a coma for one night, in the hospital, with his son. It was a miracle! He didn’t have any problems afterwards, thank God. Many people have died here, it is dangerous here, there is no security because there is no time to see the train coming.- Emilia

Figure 53 Untitled by Emilia from the project *Travessia*, 2021, by Susan Meiselas
<https://travessia462196210.wordpress.com/annotated-photos/dangerous-railroad-riobom/#dangerous-railroad>
[Accessed 23 November 2023]

Some practitioners were avidly averse to the notion of any form of networked engagement; others were relieved by the opportunities it could provide. Consequently, we once again found ourselves falling into the trap of viewing the world in binaries - only this time between the virtual and the real. For a moment of time during the pandemic lockdowns, this perpetuated the idea and illusion of a digitally dualistic⁷⁸ view of the world where the physical and the digital are experienced as distinct and separate. However, what was increasingly happening instead was that the distortion between the digital, the physical and the networked virtual was, in effect, expanding even further. Nathan Jurgenson, a techno-sociologist who explores the use of images on social media, affirms that the idea of digital dualism is a fallacy. Evidently inspired by Donna Haraway's cyborg⁷⁹, he proposes instead the concept of 'augmented reality', which is based on the premise that the digital and the physical are increasingly entangled, "...that implodes atoms and bits rather than holding them conceptually separate" and that "...digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other." (2011, p.1), which he further elaborates on in his book *The Social Photo* (2019). Consequently, despite our quandary and perceived separation between the virtual and the physical, the pandemic accelerated the process of ambiguity between those two modalities and rendered their separation ineffective. The notion of augmented reality now extends beyond the idea of the pandemic - technology is likely to be embedded within participatory photography in some form - with a hybrid model of delivery becoming increasingly popular.

Meiselas' *Travessia* is a sort of representation of this enmeshment within collaborative practice. It can serve as an example of this entanglement at play as the final exhibition is a mixture and interplay of networked images, materialised into prints, created via disembodied interactions and viewed in a physical space. Nathan Jurgenson's proposition of augmented reality within *Travessia*, now ironically, can also serve as a metaphor for the blurred relationship between the digital, virtual and the physical. Within *Who Are These Women?* there was an inevitable interplay of the 'on' and 'offline' operating in tandem and informing each other at the level of production and consumption. Participants engaged with their 'offline' realities through the photographic prompts assigned to them. They subsequently presented them to the rest of the group and the world remotely within an online environment.

⁷⁸ According to Jurgenson many who are critical of social media platforms such as Facebook hold a belief in digital dualism, which asserts that the digital world is merely a "virtual" realm while the physical world is the only true reality (Jurgenson 2011).

⁷⁹ Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborg manifesto rejects ideas of essentialism in identity and explores the boundaries between human and machines, which she claims are becoming increasingly blurred, and she suggests that we should embrace this hybridity.

Conversely, a separation between the virtual, digital and the physical, especially within the realm of networked images, online sharing and the use of mobile phones, is an impossibility. The role of these networked technologies and their critical exploration within participatory photography was an inevitable necessity; all the pandemic did was accelerate this process. Thus, with the increasing use of new technologies, mobile phones and networked images, a dualistic view of remote engagement versus in-person is no longer entirely possible within collaborative practice. Joanna Zylinska proposes that "...even those images that are produced by the human, whether artist or amateur, entail a nonhuman, mechanical element" (2017, p.2). As practitioners engage with new media and technologies, exploring this entanglement, its ethical dimensions and other implications is becoming increasingly important.

In contrast to remote engagement, which utilises video conferencing tools, in 2018, I took part in a remote therapeutic photography practitioner course at the Royal Gordon University. The pre-pandemic course was delivered entirely online and remotely. The course consisted of image and text-based interactions, including very valuable instructional materials, via a forum format, which often involved experiential prompts of a very personal nature for the course attendees to engage with. The forum format consisted of text-based interactions and image sharing. Participants were able to post their responses, and we were encouraged to engage with other people's work. While the instructional materials were very insightful and the prompts were well considered, this kind of text-based interaction did not feel conducive to creating a group dynamic and forming connections and relationships with the group and other group members.

My level of engagement and enthusiasm in participating remained relatively low throughout the process, which continued for several months. However, at the time, the idea of live connection did not seem effective, viable or possible. Without undermining the potential of asynchronous text-based communities like the example of Lisa Selby's Bluebaglife on Instagram, as discussed in Chapter 1, they seem to be more aligned to stimulate passive consumption rather than active participation. This form of engagement has significance and value in its own right, however, the therapeutic photography course left me wondering how entirely text-based spaces and interactions differ and affect group dynamics and their place and ability to meet the demands of participatory photography engagement, specifically in providing reciprocated interaction, a sense of community and connection. Consequently, I would argue that a synchronous environment is necessary to create a group dynamic and build personal relationships and interactions between collaborators and participants for PCVL to be

effective. Furthermore, how can these relationships and interactions take place remotely and online to create a sense of connectedness whilst mediated by a screen? It is also important to critically examine the implications of different actors, both human and technological, and their roles within such projects.

Sherry Turkle, a sociologist and social sciences scholar, studies the impact of technology on people in her book *Life on Screen* (1995), in which she explores the opportunities technology can provide. The internet, for example, offers a unique environment where one can explore and express different facets of themselves. Turkle also discusses the potential impact of online communication on our ability to engage in deep and meaningful conversations. She argues that the internet's asynchronous nature and the ability to curate our digital personas selectively can result in superficial engagement with others, as people often ignore the difficult and vulnerable aspects of their experiences.

However, in Turkle's more recent work, *Alone Together* (2011), she expresses her concerns about using technology and urges us to think critically about the use of technology. The use of asynchronous technology in human communication does not facilitate genuine eye contact and the recognition of nonverbal cues, which are essential aspects of human connection. In her book *Reclaiming Conversations* (2015, p.7), Turkle argues that eye contact helps convey trust, empathy, and understanding when we engage in face-to-face conversations. It establishes a sense of presence and attentiveness, indicating that we are fully engaged in the interaction. However, Turkle also acknowledges the complexity of the issue and recognises that technology has provided new opportunities for connection and can enhance certain types of communication. For example, video calls can facilitate eye contact, even if it's mediated through a screen. However, she also talks about the fatigue and issues that come with these forms of virtual interactions in a conversation that was broadcast via Zoom during the pandemic (2021). Therefore, when I was designing and setting up *Who Are These Women?* I felt it was necessary for the interactions throughout the workshops to be conducted face-to-face, even if this meant doing this via video conferencing software like Zoom, and the implications that came with it needed mitigating. Virtual interactions cannot yet fully replace real interactions, but virtual eye contact provides a sense of connectedness necessary for establishing a participatory photography project group dynamic.

Within the online workshop setting of this project, it was not easy to allow for free-flowing conversations between people due to the limitations of video conferencing tools and the way conversation flows within these settings. It lacks organic points of contact between people and

informal discussions, gestures and corporeal interactions, which can bring people together to diffuse conflicting situations or to bring people closer. It also makes it harder for the facilitator to provide individual support or for individuals to check in on each other during the process itself. Therefore, it felt at times throughout the workshops that differences and their negotiations were unable to unfold as much as they would have within an in-person interaction.

Initially, it took me a significant amount of time to figure out how the *Who Are These Women?* workshops could be possible, entirely conducted remotely, staying true to the interactive and relational group dynamic elements of this approach and making the needed adjustments in setting up the participatory photography workshops online. My initial focus was on figuring out the various platforms and tools that would provide information on how viable this would be without making significant compromises on the approach. The possibility of translating the interactive experiences of sharing and discussing photographs, entirely online, required considerable research and exploration. Being able to see people's faces felt essential, but was not enough to provide a virtual space conducive to discussion through the use of images. Therefore, it also needed to incorporate the interactive needs of a project of this nature, which usually involves sharing and annotating images.

Several visual collaboration tools gained popularity as professional teams and collaborators required these tools to continue their work remotely. This enquiry into the various technical possibilities revealed a myriad of options that I had not previously anticipated. Some shortlisted visual collaboration tools enabled participants to annotate, caption, move, collaborate on, and arrange photographs individually and collectively in real-time. They also provided rich brainstorming functionality, replacing the use of sticky notes and the extensive printing that comes with running workshops like these in person. The eventual visual collaboration tool that I decided to use was also able to function as a password-protected personal sketchbook/thinking space for each participant, an image repository for sharing and discussing photographs, as a brainstorming and PCVL discussion tool.

The ubiquity of the smartphone camera also enabled phones as an alternative to providing cameras to participants and enabled them to join online sessions and share their images. Within *Who Are These Women?* mobile phones allowed participants to join live workshop sessions remotely, even without explicit access to a computer. While this does not address issues of digital exclusion and other ethical implications of using technology, it provided an opportunity for participants with smartphone access to engage in the project. Some

participants sustained their involvement entirely through their smartphones. Therefore, the smartphone becomes a powerful tool that can be at the same time a camera, a tool for virtual face-to-face interaction and a way to interact with the project and photo sharing.

Furthermore, the use of the camera apparatus within a collaborative practice holds specific importance as a tool for engagement. Point-and-shoot cameras have often been the go-to choice for participatory photography projects, which are now being phased out of production. The ubiquity of the camera phone will now increasingly become the preferred tool, making it the new and obvious choice for projects like these. Therefore, a participatory photography project utilising phones becomes significantly mediated by the mobile phone, technology and the screen. Such participatory photography projects heavily reliant on technology inevitably require an exploration of the role these forms of mediation play in this process, the risks they pose and how power is re-distributed based on the agency of both human and technological actors.

The camera has been the most important technology within participatory photography projects. In Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000), he describes the camera apparatus as having agency of its own. He proposes that the apparatus is not a neutral tool or instrument but rather an active agent that shapes our perception and understanding of the world. He suggests that it has its own program or logic that determines how it operates and influences human behaviour. In this sense, Flusser considered the apparatus to be autonomous, exerting a certain degree of control over human actions. For him, the apparatus creates a framework of predetermined possibilities and constraints within which human beings operate. It shapes our thoughts, desires, and actions by providing a range of choices and limiting our options. He argues that understanding this process is crucial to maintaining individual autonomy and resisting the dominant control of the apparatus (2000, p.21). Flusser's ideas focus entirely on the camera alone and propose a somewhat deterministic view of technology, which neglects the complex interplay between technology, humans and society and the power dynamics that shape these interactions. Bruno Latour (2005), on the other hand, offers a more balanced perspective of the interplay between humans and technology through Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which explores the complex relationships of both human and non-human actors that shape these interactions and the creation of meaning. While this study does not utilise ANT as a framework, it can be useful when considering the role of technology in shaping remote engagement within participatory photography.

For example, the use of smartphone cameras and remote engagement raises questions regarding privacy, surveillance and the impact of connectivity on the wellbeing of participants. During the *Who Are These Women?* workshops, one of the participants struggled to have her camera on at all times, and some of the workshops had to be significantly shorter to tackle screen fatigue that inevitably manifested after a while. Furthermore, the privilege of privacy was only available to some throughout the pandemic. One young woman eventually withdrew from the workshops as this mode of engagement was unsustainable for her due to the lack of a private space.

Moreover, the networked camera on our phones can capture and transmit data about our lives, leading to potential privacy concerns. The screenshot, as seen in Figure 52, portrays this problem of how women's personal spaces, often bedrooms, are made visible through this form of video-enabled interaction. Therefore, through online video engagement, the phone or computer camera invades our privacy directly by opening a window to our private spaces and indirectly through data embedded in the images utilised as part of the project. Any camera we use for video conferencing can become a portal to our lives and homes, creating a fundamentally different experience than the one that entails entering a workshop space when engaging in a participatory photography project.

While the camera phone is becoming an extension of our bodies, and its ability to instantly share images with others expands the possible scope of our social interactions, this entanglement with technology also has its limitations - echoing Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg (1991) which highlights the blurring boundaries between humans and technology and suggests that our bodies and identities are intertwined with technological enhancements. With its camera and networked capabilities, the use of the smartphone starts to embody these ideas within *Who Are These Women?*. The smartphone became a central hub for interaction within the group through video conferencing tools, a way to create and respond to prompts, and a way to share and annotate images, which also limited who could participate and from where and entirely shaped the experiences of the process.



Figure 54 The digital reciprocal structure in motion, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1232215/368/727> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The third iteration of the reciprocal structure (Figure 54) embodies the entanglement of the technological within human life and remote engagement within the *Who Are These Women?* workshops and the dilemmas that come with it. It consists of a whirlwind of screens that create a portal in the shape of the reciprocal structure. This is an embodiment of the idea of participatory photography mediated through screens and mobile phones. Each one of us is represented through a screen within the video conferencing engagement. Analogously to a photograph, the screen mediates by placing our online interactions within a frame. A frame that is a portal to a different space and time, thus potentially providing excess information about our personal lives and simultaneously only offering a fragmented representation of what it is we are seeing and experiencing. While these virtual interactions offer a sense of presence, connectedness and a version of reality in relationship to what is being seen, just like the photograph's inability to represent real life, this can be an illusion based on a partial version of what is really there.

Furthermore, the transition from a three-dimensional physical world to a two-dimensional digital representation can lead to a loss of depth, scale, and other spatial and bodily cues that are often necessary to form our experience and human interaction. Like the networked image, the screen comprises information in the form of pixels and data, which is then transmitted and dependent on the screen's size, resolution, colour reproduction, and other technical factors that may impact the reliability of the displayed content. The change of scale and perception also offers a limited and distorted version of what is being represented. Reminiscent of Baudrillard's hyperreal (1994), as the boundaries between the real and the digital became blurred within these conversations, we found ourselves navigating and participating in a hyperreal environment where simulations and digital representations shape our perception and understanding of each other and the world around us.

Moreover, the camera here also serves as a mirror within most video conferencing tools, as one can see themselves simultaneously as they can see the other, which is not a usual part of face-to-face conversations. The mirror image, like the selfie, on the screen can also serve as a point of self-identification and self-perception through one's personal gaze, which also reminds one of Vayani's work on the echo chamber, which is comprised of mirrors as seen in Figure 40 and elaborated on in Chapter 3. While presented as a coherent image, it is ultimately fragmented and incomplete and does not fully correspond to the person's actual body. A version of the Lacanian mirror stage (2006, p.93), which introduces the recognition of otherness and difference, can occur while participants negotiate their own desires for recognition and connection with others, shaping their behaviour and performance as they see themselves and, therefore, determining the dynamics of the video conference workshop. In this way, the image on the screen introduces a form of "augmented seeing that recodes how we look" (Jurgenson 2019, p.36).

Like the infinity mirror, the video feedback loop, consisting of a camera looking at itself through the screen with its playback, creates a screen-based version of the reciprocal structure. This optical illusion, which is locked in an endless loop of the camera looking at itself, is reminiscent of the reflective nature of the workshops and the way these group interactions and reflections have been mediated through the screen. The recursive and self-referential nature of the video feedback loop can also symbolise the reflective nature of the participatory photography workshops and the constructed and subjective nature of self-perception and identity, which are often constructed and mediated through the images we consume on screens.

This act of looking and being looked at through the camera, resembling the camera looking at itself continuously, can also serve as a reminder of contemporary visual culture. This notion can be recognised in the famous photograph by Annie Leibovitz of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West made in their child's nursery as seen in Figure 55. The photo shows Kim looking at her phone, as if to take a selfie, while Kanye photographs them on his iPad, with a version of their image visible on the iPad screen. All this is framed within the backdrop of a mirror that reflects the whole scene, which includes both of them engaging with their cameras on their mobile devices. This constellation of cameras and mirrors, forming an infinity loop of looking and being looked at, can be seen as a metaphorical reflection, implying an endless cycle of the camera acting as a tool for surveillance, self-representation and self-observation within the context of the digital era. The lines between the personal gaze and that of the camera are merged into one. The image within an image also raises questions about the ability of the networked image to represent life truthfully.

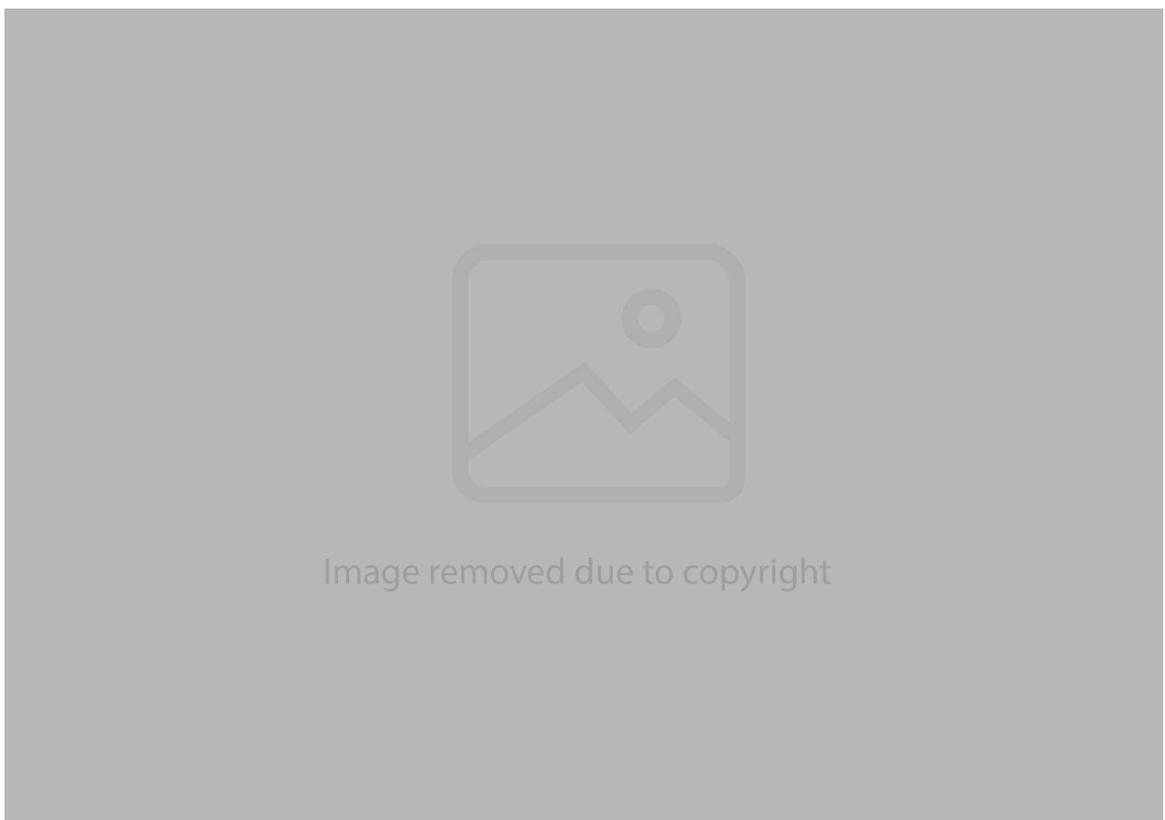


Figure 55 Kim Kardashian, North West, and Kanye West, Los Angeles, 2014, by Annie Leibovitz
<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2017/september/14/how-annie-leibovitz-captured-kim-and-kanyes-selfie-side/> [Accessed on 23 November 2023]

Therefore, the video feedback loop, as seen in the digital reciprocal structure in Figure 54 can be seen as a reflection of the reliance on the screen and smartphone for self-observation and as an exploration of the implications associated with the mediation of the screen and its effects

on authenticity, intimacy, and personal connection both within society and the context of this research within participatory photography and more broadly with the image and the camera, which this research is also concerned with.

Furthermore, video-conferencing tools, like the mirror or the front camera of a smartphone, have the potential to further the idea of self-reflection through the visual feedback one sees of themselves during a video call. The screen-based iteration of the reciprocal structure aims to embody this idea as well; each screen representation is required for the stability of the structure and on the visual feedback loop to form our understanding of ourselves and the subjectivities of the world around us. The work of Erin M. Riley called *Webcam 2* from 2020 (Figure 56), which was made during the COVID-19 pandemic, takes this idea further. The work is a wool and cotton tapestry that depicts, in the foreground, a body looking at what might be interpreted at first glance as the person looking at themselves on a computer screen. In the background, a hanging mirror reflects the scene that is happening in the foreground. The interaction between the screen and mirror, feeding back to each other, also resembles the infinity mirror effect and highlights the similarities or differences between both of these modes of reflection. However, upon further inspection of the image within the image on the computer screen, we can interpret it as being that of another person. The screen thus distorts and blurs the boundaries between the image of the self and that of the other. Through the disembodied interaction which takes place on a screen - which appears to be of an intimate nature within this work - the screen provides a sense of presence but at the same time perpetuates the notion of absence, reminding us once again of Sherry Turkle's sentiment on technology and more specifically the heading of her book - *Alone Together* (2011). Furthermore, the material nature of the tapestry and the hours of physical labour that went into weaving this piece of work contradict the disembodied experiences depicted within it. This juxtaposition of the material with its striking physical presence versus the virtual and incorporeal almost renders the latter as 'immaterial'; like in Meiselas' *Travessia*, and the workshops of *Who Are These Women?* the boundaries of the physical and virtual interaction are distorted within its delivery and final presentation.

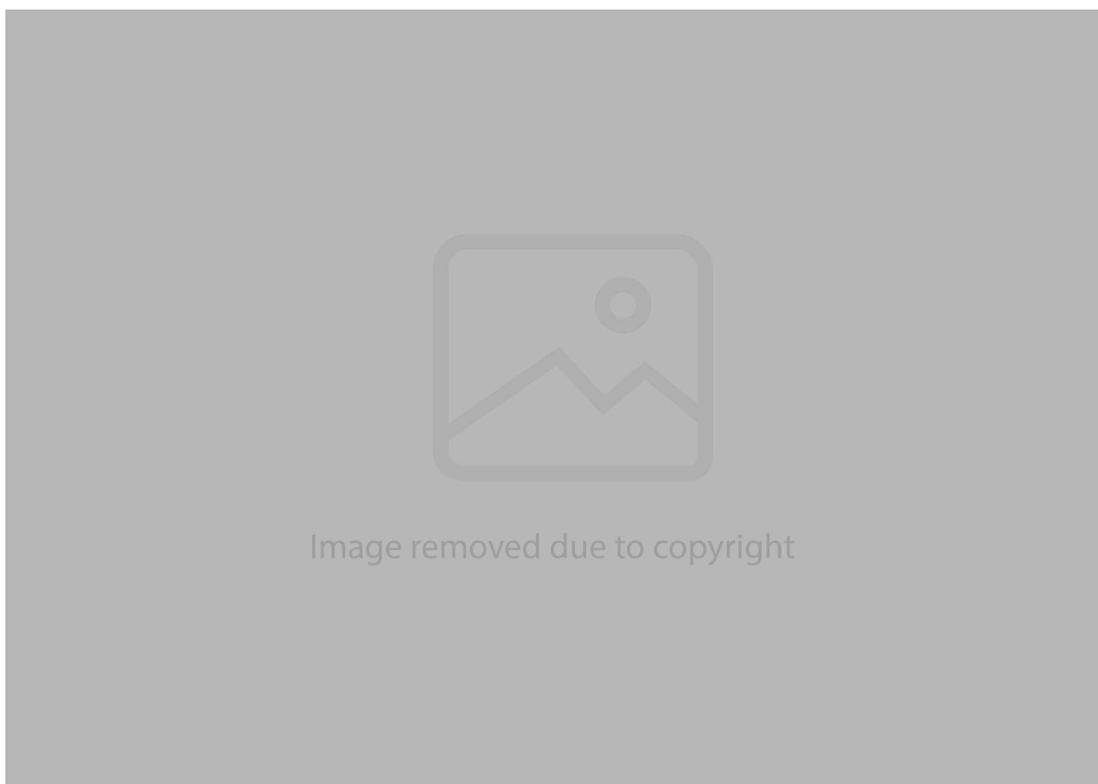


Figure 56 "Webcam 2", 2020, by Erin Riley <https://erinmriley.com/artwork/4833117-Webcam%202.html>
[Accessed 25 November 2023]

Within *Who Are These Women?* the interaction between the virtual and the physical was intertwined in the way the discussions took place entirely through the video conferencing modes of interaction with the group, in conjunction with the execution of the prompts and the creation of images within a physical space. Participants engaged with the group virtually but were prompted to interact with their physical environment through the images that they produced. Thus, a clear separation between the virtual and the physical is, in this sense, impossible in the context of remote participatory photography workshops.

The separation between the online and the offline interaction created a form of *dépaysement*⁸⁰ between the physical experiences and those that were online throughout the workshop phase. While the online engagement did not provide the same experience as interacting with people in person, it did provide a sense of being together as a group and collaborating and perhaps a revived sense of interpretation of the real world as it was explored through the photographic prompts in between workshop sessions. As a facilitator, I experienced these connections differently from previous workshops I have done in-person.

⁸⁰ Dépaysement (displacement from French) is a term used by Levi-Strauss as an anthropological technique which involves stepping away from something familiar gives you the space to re-evaluate it as if it were new (1963).

Nonetheless, I had a sense of knowing the participants throughout *Who Are These Women?*, but at the same time, I did not.

Despite knowing that some of the young women went on to interact with each other beyond the workshops and that synergies were formed through the work that we did together, I felt the sense of distance most prominently during the exhibition celebration, which we did in the form of an online get-together. It felt underwhelming in comparison to an event that would have been in-person. Through the lack of bodies interacting within a physical space, what we felt together did not provide the same experience or excitement. Video conferencing tools have the potential to provide an experience that supports discussions and interactions and can facilitate group dynamics; however, they also lack in that they provide just like the view on the screen, only a partial sense of presence and connection. Ultimately, the crossover between the digital and the physical is becoming increasingly blurry, and this form of online participant engagement will provide what Sherry Turkle framed in her Ted talk the Goldilocks effect: “Not too close. Not Too Far. Just right.” (2012). However, what feels right will be whatever the new normal has become. Inevitably, the new normal within participatory photography could include a form of engagement that utilises a hybrid form of participation, which will require a sustained relationship with technology in an ethical and considerate way. This could include some in-person interactions followed by remote discussions and image sharing, thus utilising the strengths of both of those forms of interaction: the connections and relationships that are formed with embodied encounters with others and the shaping of the group dynamic, which will then be followed by remote discussions and image uploads.

The Hands Reciprocal Structure

WHO ARE THESE WOMEN?

A Participatory Photography Project
by Kallina Brailsford

Alexandra Haslam
Alma Silva
Kate Freer
Rachel Goulding
Nikki Robson
Shahreen Vayani
Victoria Aquino

VIEW 3D VERSION HERE

For the best viewing experience
of the 3D exhibition use a computer
with the latest version of chrome



Figure 57 The hands reciprocal structure as part of Who Are These Women?, 2021, by Kallina Brailsford

Infinity

Flatness with no beginning and no end

It smells of campfire

Every point equidistant from its centre

It feels smooth and flowing

Nothing jarring. No corners. No turns

Going round in circles

Water going down a drain

Fast and furious, like a roller coaster

A circle

It is a container with no exit

A place without a place

Relationships made up of hands, screens and numbers

Things that are not things

A reciprocal structure

The third iteration of the reciprocal structure (Figure 57) came about as I realised that the 3D exhibition only provides a viewing experience to those who have a computer that is powerful enough. I realised that I needed to create a version of the exhibition that does not perpetuate digital exclusion and that each woman who was part of this project would be equally able to engage with the final part of the work we created together. The reciprocal structure at that point had been embraced as a central metaphor for this project and needed to be incorporated into the 2D iteration. I spent a significant amount of time deliberating on how to create a representation of this structure that is meaningful in a two-dimensional way. In discussion with an architect who proposed the reciprocal structure, it became apparent that the structure itself is inspired by support and strength in unity, which seemed aligned with the values that are often attributed to collaborations and participatory photography.

The idea of unity represented through the hands became increasingly apparent when I realised in that same conversation that the human equivalent of the reciprocal structure is the formation of hands that come together to form a structure. An example of this from my childhood memory is when we interweaved our hands in this way to create what we used to call a 'chair' so that we could gather collective strength to lift each other up physically when needed (Figure 58). I do not recall the purpose of the games we played, but the impression that this left on me was the significance and effectiveness of this physical collaboration among our hands. Despite the somewhat visual cliché that this iteration of the reciprocal structure embodies, the hands and circles started to become metaphors which have their own significant place within this work as a representation of participatory photography and the process of support and collaboration.

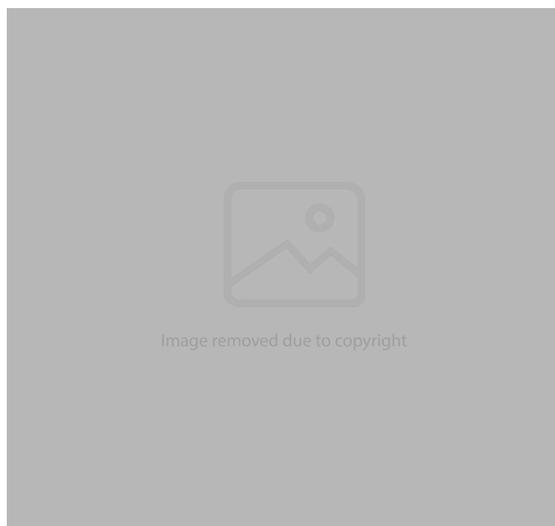


Figure 58 A seat made of hands, by Diego del Pozo
<https://ca2m.org/en/The-Museum/Team> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Extended hands and the fist have also been used in multiple ways as a symbol against oppression. Social justice groups, such as the civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, have used the raised fist as a sign of resistance and togetherness. Feminist activists have also recognised the symbol's significance and capacity to convey a message of strength, unity, and resistance. The 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, organised by the National Organisation for Women, is one of the most well-known instances of the raised fist being utilised as a feminist symbol. Thousands of women marched through the streets, holding posters with phrases such as "Equal pay for equal work" and "Women join with labour for equality." Therefore, the hands are an established symbol of resistance.

As a symbol, the hands can also serve as a powerful expression of hope and connection. In *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit (2016) discusses how social movements, from the civil rights movement to the anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa, have used the extended hand to symbolise resistance and unity. She rationalises that an extended hand may be a powerful sign of hope and connection, serving as a reminder that we are not alone in our challenges. The idea of connection and finding hope and strength in shared experience is central to running a participatory photography project, and within *Who Are These Women?*. The extended hands, as depicted in this iteration of the reciprocal structure, are together but intentionally do not touch. This disconnect relates back to the incorporeal experience that online engagement and this iteration of the workshops provided: we were together, but our bodies never had an encounter with each other. The hands are reaching out to each other as a form of support, seemingly together but yet apart, as discussed in the previous section on remote engagement.

The hands on the surface represent each woman's identity and presence within this project. However, other multi-layered interpretations exist within the symbol of the hands, beyond what can be found within the cliché of strength, unity, togetherness and hope. Hands can also honour the performance of women's domestic work and serve as a reclamation of the strength required to sustain this labour within domestic life, which our hands are at the centre of - whether it is our hands that carry our children, or our hands that wash and clean or offer a helping hand. This idea of hidden labour is also expressed in the work of Vayani, one of the research participants, as seen in Figure 59.



Word: Hidden Labour



Word: Capitalism



Word: Impact

Figure 59 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Shahreen Vayani (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233085>
[Accessed 23 November 2023]

In the concluding chapter of her book *Willful Subjects*, Sarah Ahmed (2014) explores the significance of the raised arms as a symbol of resistance. She notes:

Feminist hands, though, might be helpful in another way: helping women to protest against being helpers. Of course, as soon as we say that, we have to say this: any feminism that can live up to the promise of that name will not free some women from being helping hands by employing other women to take their place. (Ahmed 2014, p.195).

The circle of hands within the reciprocal structure honours women's hands that perform this labour as a form of reclamation of this cliché. I honour women's hands for the number of times I have seen my mother care for her hands as a result of washing dishes and the number of times I have seen my friends care for the pain in their hands due to carrying their young children. Hands connect and bring us together, but they also do and endure. They have been central to women's undertaking of domestic work, which still often remains invisible and undervalued. I have been told on many occasions, usually by men who have not engaged in any domestic work themselves, that complaining about doing housework is a female cliché. Therefore, the hands within this last iteration of the reciprocal structure form a circle to represent the obvious: unity, togetherness, reciprocation and connection, but they also stand for the reclamation of the cliché and attempt to make visible women's hands and the domestic labour that they are often expected to engage in based on their gender.

Moreover, the hands depicted in white can relate to ideas of intersectionality, or its lack thereof, and the notion of digital exclusion. It was highlighted to me during a discussion of the work that the white colour can be perceived as a reference to race. Initially, I considered changing the colour of the hands. However, upon reflection, I decided to stick with the original version of the hands as it represents its limitations and relates to the lack of access for the most vulnerable groups of people that can occur within the recruitment process of a participatory photography project. This became particularly relevant to the selection within a remote engagement process due to the role of digital exclusion.

Intersectionality and Digital Exclusion

The area of intersectionality requires significant consideration within participatory photography, including issues related to access and digital exclusion within this research context. Intersectionality encompasses how social, economic, and cultural factors intersect to create disparities in participation and representation, mainly when projects rely on technological platforms, internet connection and mobile phones. By depending on the use of technology, projects could unintentionally exclude individuals who lack access to computers or digital devices, potentially maintaining the status quo of existing inequalities. This limited accessibility perpetuates the digital divide, further marginalising individuals from low-income backgrounds and areas with inadequate technological infrastructure. It is also necessary to recognise that digital exclusion extends beyond internet access alone and encompasses a broader range of socioeconomic and cultural factors.

By recruiting the participants via Instagram for this research, which caters predominantly to users with smartphones and reliable internet connectivity, the project would have excluded young women who cannot afford high-quality smartphones or have consistent internet access. It is essential to acknowledge that the most vulnerable populations, as well as non-cisgender women, who may benefit significantly from projects like participatory photography, often face the highest barriers to access. This includes individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, trans and non-binary people, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. A considerable limitation of this project was that it inadvertently excluded some of these populations by solely relying on platforms like Instagram, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities and limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives represented within the work had it been conducted differently. The absence of trans women, for example, highlights this limitation related to access and scope rather than a deliberate oversight. This emphasises the necessity for future research to broaden the recruitment avenues for these critical methodologies to reach and include more diverse participant groups.

Remote participation and the use of technology extend beyond access to technology but can also include access to a physical space. This can present significant challenges for some participants in being able to engage with the discussions throughout the workshops. For example, one young woman participating in the workshops often walked on the street and joined from her phone due to the lack of a private space to participate in the workshop. This lack of privacy had an impact on the rest of the group and ultimately led to her dropping out of

the project. The lack of private spaces raises questions of confidentiality in terms of who is potentially present in the discussions beyond what is visible on the screen. Additionally, some participants might be put at risk if they are participating within their homes, where other family members might be present. The lack of a private space will significantly impact their ability to have open discussions, particularly in the case of this project, which involved young women who might be sharing views that other members of their families might have opposed.

In future projects, addressing these disparities and promoting inclusivity will require exploring alternative approaches whenever possible. This may involve considering various platforms and engagement methods beyond Instagram. As previously discussed, offline engagement and hybrid strategies can provide more accessible participation opportunities for individuals with limited digital resources. Furthermore, collaborating with community organisations and devising strategies to bridge the digital divide can help create more equitable opportunities for participation, ensuring that the perspectives of marginalised communities are heard within participatory photography projects.

Participatory photography projects, by default, can bridge the digital divide by providing marginalised groups access to digital equipment. Budgeting and purchasing cameras and smartphones, and leaving them with community members, is one way that may be effective for some projects working in areas where digital exclusion would be a significant consideration. Providing SIM cards and access to data plans can be another way of creating a more equitable and inclusive form of participation. However, these mitigating options can pose challenges and have ethical implications of their own in terms of the risk that can occur by embedding technology within a community and, specifically, the risks involved in providing technology to a selected number of participants. The use of personal smartphones can also be problematic by reinforcing power discrepancies and furthering the digital divide by exposing the difference in value and quality of the phones that participants own. Personal smartphones can turn into points of comparison between participants by emphasising their perceived socio-economic differences and access to technology. Therefore, it is critical to consider the best format, technology and use of cameras appropriate to each project's specific context and circumstances.

Participatory photography projects can strive for greater inclusivity and representation by acknowledging digital exclusion, considering alternative platforms, and working towards bridging the digital divide. These efforts are crucial to ensure that the most vulnerable populations are not further marginalised and that diverse perspectives have the opportunity to

contribute and shape the narratives within these projects. Participatory photography workshops can also encourage peer-to-peer mentoring, where individuals with more digital proficiency can support those less familiar with digital tools and platforms. The right tools and skilful facilitation are crucial in managing these processes within remote participatory photography projects.

On Facilitation

Facilitation is the process of moderating the group dynamics and processes and navigating collective decision-making (Hunter 2009). Facilitating a participatory space requires creating an environment that fosters open communication, shared decision-making, and a sense of safety and respect among all participants. Skilful facilitation in creating a comfortable and supportive environment for group work is significant for the success of each project. The idea of the container in facilitation is a powerful tool that can be used to create a safe and supportive environment for group work. In the context of this project, I put tremendous effort to step into an internal space where I am not an educator or a friend but there to serve and moderate the group's needs. This is possible by establishing clear guidelines and expectations, providing a sense of predictability and consistency, and creating a framework for group work. The facilitator can help promote trust, reduce anxiety, and create an environment where meaningful and productive work can occur.

There are potential pitfalls when thinking of safe spaces and facilitation. Some challenges are unique to every project, and regardless of how skilled one may be, each group is unique and will pose its own set of specific challenges. Facilitation is an ongoing learning process. This raises the question of whether facilitators can really live up to the promise of a safe space. Furthermore, the experience of comfort and safety can be considered subjective, as what's considered comfortable can vary widely among individuals based on their personal experiences and perceptions. The facilitator's role can be to negotiate differences respectfully by striving to create as safe an environment as possible by setting clear guidelines for behaviour, promoting respect and understanding, and actively managing conflict and harm.

It is important to consider safe spaces as environments where individuals can freely express their creativity without fear of judgment or discrimination, where the focus has been on inclusivity and respect for individual perspectives. However, Arao and Clemens (2013) oppose the idea of safe spaces and propose the concept of the 'brave space'. They argue that the goal of making everyone feel 'safe' can be counterproductive in discussions about social justice,

which inherently involve conflict, discomfort, and the challenging of deeply held beliefs. They propose that facilitators of such discussions should instead strive to create "brave spaces," in which participants understand that they will likely experience discomfort but that this discomfort can be a valuable part of the learning process. Thus, a brave space is a helpful framework when considering facilitation, as it acknowledges the differences in perspectives and encourages participants to engage in difficult conversations and confront challenging social issues through their created artwork.

Tremendous care should be taken through creating group agreements, promoting empathy and active listening. However, every group is unique, and like the reciprocal structure, it is contained by the sum of its parts. The group can also be a container with no exit. As much as it can be inclusive, it can be exclusive, as discussed in the previous section on digital exclusion. Furthermore, bringing people together through lived experience has the potential to act as an agent that puts people even further into their labelled categories: in this case, NEET, unemployed, and precarious. I am still struggling to decide on the most appropriate term for this project. One should adopt a critical and reflexive approach to facilitation, acknowledging how power and these ethical considerations shape group dynamics and therefore act accordingly; however, this will always have its limitations and variables.

Additionally, within these relational frameworks, the concept of influence and contagion⁸¹ can impact the way creative ideas are transferred, copied and built upon within the group, as well as how each participant influences the emotional response to photographs within the group. This aspect within the group can have many positive outcomes, which are to enhance creativity through examples and association of ideas, as well as to build and develop individual perspectives through the process of feedback and discussion. However, contagion and the sharing of ideas and perspectives can also often have limitations that need to be carefully managed. Examples could significantly influence how meaning is created and the shape of the final project outputs. For instance, the oversharing of creative examples by expert facilitators⁸² can lead to hindrances for some participants as they may focus too much on doing what is perceived as expected of them based on the examples and shared work by more skilled or dominant figures within the group dynamic, which can also lead to potential limitations within the work that is produced. These relational intersubjectivities, group dynamics, power

⁸¹ Contagion is related to the concept of emotional contagion which refers to a form of projection of one's thoughts and feeling on to others (Hatfield et al. 2011, p.19)

⁸² Photographers or others seen as experts within their field

relations, and contagion are fundamental aspects that must be considered in the participatory photography workshop set-up and facilitation.

Group dynamics and the power structures within them can often play a significant role in shaping the expression and reception of meaning, as well as the creation of subsequent narratives, within participatory photography. The constitution of the group and its relations are always unique based on the individuals within it. This configuration of power between facilitator and participants and dominant voices can significantly impact the outputs and how individual subjectivities are shaped and embodied within the final work. This emphasises the importance of careful and skilful facilitation to ensure a balance within the group and that each voice is validated, included and respected. Power dynamics are a significant factor in this context, shaping both the expression of individual narratives and the feedback process. As Davis notes "Relational subjectivity means engaging not simply with a person, but with that person in relationship to a particular situation." (Davis, 2011, p.9). The facilitator and any dominant voices hold substantial influence over the group's communication patterns, creative flow, and the validation of different perspectives. While participatory photography aims to diminish the power discrepancies between the researcher and participants, it is important to acknowledge that they still exist and to make efforts to manage this in a reflective way. Navigating these dynamics thoughtfully is vital to maintaining an inclusive and respectful environment where all narratives can be included. Within *Who Are These Women?* As a facilitator, the influence was palpable to me in some instances of decision-making, particularly when participants were feeling uncertain or hesitant about some of their choices.

Ethics and Power

When working with others, whether for research purposes or an artistic collaboration, ethics, risk, and consent should all be a central consideration. Scholars in the field of socially engaged art, such as Claire Bishop, Paulo Helguera and Grant Kester, discuss the significance of collaboration, participation and sustained engagement and the importance of empathy, dialogue and respect. Questions of consent and ethics have also been a central point for discussion within photography, which are still as pertinent as ever. However, ethical considerations related to remuneration, visibility and authorship remain vague and need further exploration.

Daniel Palmer explores the ethical considerations surrounding collaborative and participatory photography. He discusses the need for respectful and transparent collaboration, informed consent, and ongoing dialogue with the participants (Palmer 2020). Ethical guidelines and sensitivity to power imbalances ensure that participatory photography practices do not exploit or tokenise the subjects or participants involved. However, the notion of ethics remains open to interpretation. It can be highly dependent on the cultural context and inherent biases and, therefore, power dynamics and decision-making that exist within each project. In *Ethics and Visual Research Methods*, an important question is raised regarding participatory research: “In reflecting on ethical practice in visual research, I am left asking ‘ethical, in whose eyes?’”. She also claims that less has been written on the “differences in values and the values and priorities, about how encounters between differing beliefs about the *right thing to do* are resolved.” (Warr et al. 2016, p.26). This sentiment raises essential concerns about ethics and their negotiation concerning difference, power, decision-making and safety, particularly when discussing participatory photography, which often involves working with marginalised communities from different backgrounds and their representation.

This research draws from the perspective of feminist ethics to address some of these ethical concerns, which can also be applied to participatory photography, because it aims to deal with the redistribution of power and the expression of marginalised perspectives. In *Rethinking Feminist Ethics*, Daryl Koehn (1998) summarises feminist discursive ethics and how they are distinguished from traditional male-centric ethical perspectives. Female ethics focus on imagination, care, trust, and empathy as essential virtues that male ethics tend to overlook. Female ethical perspectives, as described by Koehn (1998, p.8), believe that differences should not be ignored, but instead, we should aim for sufficient imaginative insight into the perspectives of others to form mutually beneficial relations. “The female ethicist takes the self to be relational, rather than discretely individualistic” (Koehn 1998, p.5) and “Respect for difference...is ethically important” (1998, p.7) as Koehn affirms. The relational and how difference is reconciled is particularly relevant to the process of participatory photography, where discussion, dialogue, and differences often need to be an ongoing negotiation within each project. This may apply when the personal views and subjectivities of the organisers, facilitators and participants come together within a specific power structure and need to be negotiated within a participatory project, once again highlighting the relevance of the question “ethical in whose eyes?”.

Koehn also argues that female ethicists are highly aware of power dynamics within communities, and any ethical system must grapple with power differentials. She also suggests

that the world we live in is not a static given but can be changed through our actions, with the potential to create a better world through acts of caring and trust (Koehn 1998, p.8). This research, through the use of participatory photography, aligns with these ideas of feminist ethics by giving individuals or communities typically marginalised or excluded from dominant discourses the ability to represent themselves and their experiences. It allows them to challenge and disrupt dominant narratives by offering alternative perspectives through their photographs. Therefore, considerations concerning the distribution of power, equality, and what is made visible, as well as who makes decisions, how, and on what basis, are at the centre of participatory photography's ethical concerns.

Often, the reality is such that the decision-makers and those who hold power are the organisers, facilitators and those who fund the projects. Sherrie Arnstein (1969) proposed "the ladder of citizen participation", which, to this day, can be seen as a valuable tool for measuring participation and engagement that involve citizen participation. While some of her ideas need an update, her proposition for the participatory ladder is still relevant, as it emphasises the importance of genuine citizen involvement in decision-making and the need to address power imbalances in participatory processes. Many participatory projects make the promise of empowerment, which would be positioned somewhere at the pinnacle of the ladder. However, it is helpful to consider and undertake a transparent approach when considering the level of participation when planning participatory photography projects. This includes adjusting the language used around the promotion and funding of these projects and considering when it is appropriate for participants to participate in decision-making and when and why. Does this involve participation in the planning and distribution stages or only in the production phase? How does remuneration reflect on the decision-making within a project, and when is it appropriate to compensate participants for their collaborations? How do power and decision-making affect the production process, visibility, and authorship?

Authorship, Visibility and Remuneration



Figure 60 Untitled as part of *Who Are These Women?*, 2021, by Alexandra Haslam (Research participant)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1232214/1233089> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

Alexandra Haslam, one of the young women participating in this research, shared this piece (Figure 60) in one of the online workshops. It concerns her role as the only woman invited to participate in a film commission. She was also the only member of the cinematography crew who would not be credited or paid for their work. Her apparent disdain for this situation left me feeling very uncomfortable. I felt some compunction with regard to how remuneration and authorship operate within this project. This encounter and the fact that a few of the women within this project were aspiring artists made me consider the parallels that can be drawn between my participatory photography facilitation style and curatorial practices.

A curator usually commissions artists to develop work related to a specific theme, a role that draws clear parallels with that of the facilitator in participatory photography. Both roles operate within a power structure that includes creating a new body of work that communicates through art. However, a significant discrepancy can be identified in the process of remuneration, commissioning and often visibility. While participatory photography often claims to make marginalised people's stories and their artistic work visible, the artist as facilitator usually acts as the gatekeeper of the process, finances and how and what is ultimately made

visible and where. Whereas, in curatorial commissions, artists are usually remunerated for their work, this remains an ethical dilemma within participatory practices. On the one hand, my compunction is justified; the time, labour, and expertise invested (participants being experts in their own experiences) must be rewarded. On the other hand, paying participants can lead to other ethical dilemmas, such as participating purely for financial reward and producing work out of concern for this being withheld - a pressure which would significantly affect the work produced and the dynamic of the interactions. Projects often try to find alternative ways of rewarding participation, sometimes resulting in tokenistic forms of exchange, for instance, overemphasising the acquisition and exchange of knowledge and the educational aspects of the process. Although these forms of incentivisation are not necessarily wrong and can be viewed as beneficial, in some instances, as Burbridge notes, "...participation comes to resemble an instrumental view of education, or just the free labour involved in unpaid internships" (Burbridge 2020, p.129). I can't help but shake the uncomfortable feeling that I initially had when viewing Alexandra's work (Figure 60) as these dynamics remind me of the well-familiar scenario for any emerging artist that has been offered a 'payment' in the form of exposure. While this relates to and goes back to the perceived value of art and culture within capitalist society, it does not sit right within the practices that aim to challenge these intrinsic power hierarchies and often aim to work with those most in need.

This is a dilemma, like a lot of the other ethical considerations within collaborative practices, that raises more questions rather than being able to provide any straightforward solutions. As stated by Anthony Luvera in an article written by Rachel Hamilton on this topic for RJP, "Would it [payment] further underscore the power imbalance between myself and the participant if I were in the position of employer? Would they feel they had to do a 'good job' to be rewarded? Would payment incentivise participation? Would they feel as free to express their own agency, interests and perspective?" (Luvera in Hamilton 2023). Furthermore, paying participants might impact other areas of their lives or their income sources, as discussed by Burbridge and Luvera (Burbridge and Luvera 2019). These reflections emphasise the necessity of ongoing ethical negotiation, rather than fixed solutions, when considering payment in collaborative visual practices.

While all of these concerns have their legitimate foundation, they can also be based on the perceived discrepancy in expertise between the participants and the artists and organisers. Often, participants are not viewed as artists in their own right. This became particularly apparent when I was setting up the SummerLodge residency in 2018, during the pilot workshops I conducted with the young, vulnerable group of people who did not have significant

experience with photography. A visitor's comment upon reading the background of the group of young people proceeded to label the work as "A-level standard" because a few of the participants would fall within that age range. The creativity of a project can also be filtered through the bias of the perceived expertise of the participants. Furthermore, in some instances, collaborative artists can be perceived to further their careers and make a living through the work that was produced: "significant reputational capital for the artists involved... that will eventually lead to payment" (Burbridge 2020, p.129). At the same time, the benefits for the participants might be insignificant in comparison. This disparity is, of course, not necessarily the case within every collaborative project.

In the making of *Who Are These Women?* I made an explicit effort to make these benefits very clear, which was evident in the participant feedback, through mentoring, support and indirect financial rewards in the form of VR masks and food vouchers. However, ultimately, I can't help but feel like I have gained the most in the long run from doing this project because it meant that I received payment to do a PhD and ultimately, leave with one. I will undoubtedly be re-evaluating this at the following stages of my practice. Finally, being transparent about the promises a project can achieve and brutally honest with oneself within these constantly evolving interactions seems to be the only answer to a myriad of questions which have no straightforward answer.

An example of a project that portrays this level of transparency and directly embodies the complexity of these collaborations is the project *Agata* by Bieke Depoorter (2023), which was done in collaboration with artist and performer Agata Key. The project consists of a 5-year-long collaboration between the photographer and the subject, which raises more questions than it can provide answers to on power dynamics, representation and the complexity of these relationships. The focus of the work seems to question these interactions and follows the evolution of these relations, blurring the evolving boundaries of authorship, visibility and remuneration within these collaborations. What distinguishes this work from others within the field is the transparency of communication and development of the interaction between them, which had originally been framed by them as a friendship, ultimately culminating in a fallout and the work being taken down.

In an exhibition at The Photographer's Gallery in early 2023 and in a statement on her website, Bieke expresses her side of the story as to why the work was taken down. In this statement, she notes: "I am extremely saddened to see that things have changed and that our special friendship has broken down in the most recent round of conversations, mainly about financial

compensation.” (Depoorter 2023). Remuneration is often the very tangible representation of how power is distributed within a project within a capitalist structure. In the second edition of the photobook *Agata*, which was initially published in 2021, we can see the correspondence, interactions and reflections of their relationship and the complexities related to negotiating power, visibility and authorship. Ultimately, the focus shifts from the project being about *Agata* to the intricacy of the collaboration process itself (Figure 61).

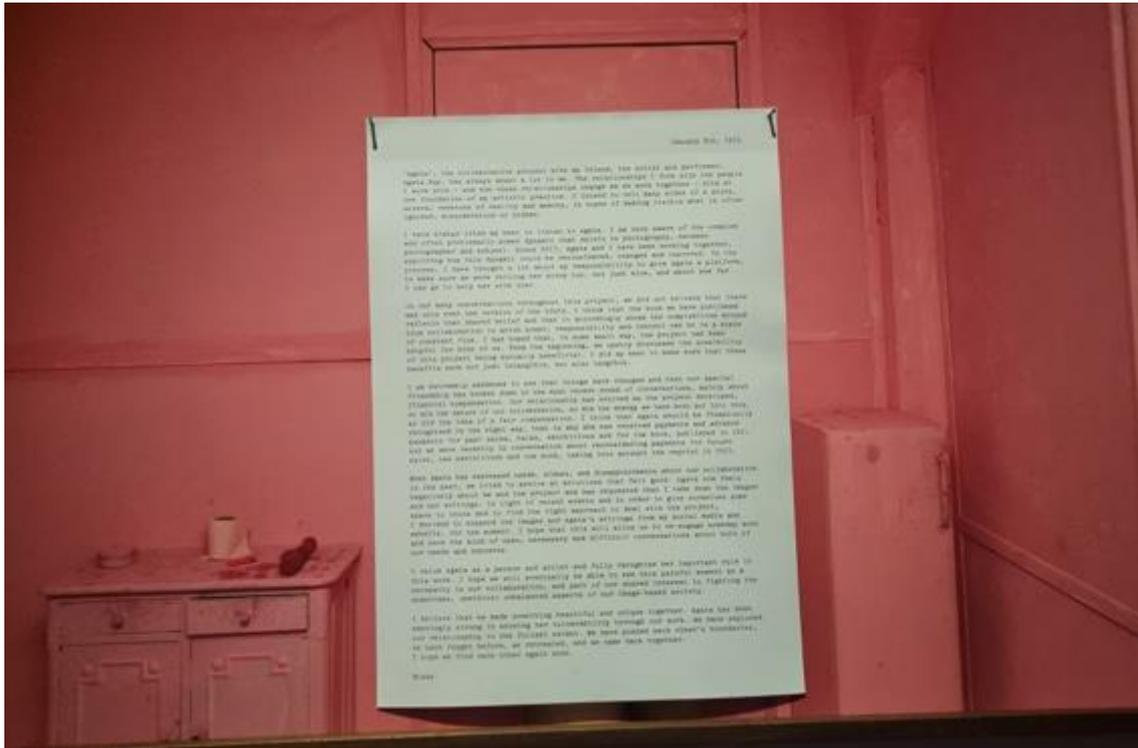


Figure 61 A photograph of Depoorter's project statement for *Agata* at The Photographer's Gallery in London, May 2023, by Kallina Brailsford

This complexity is evidently present within participatory photography. Whilst we can directly see the evolution and constant flux of these relationships between photographer and subject, the boundaries become even blurrier for participatory projects where a group of people are involved, and the artist is often invited to act merely as a facilitator or a moderator. However, the exerted influence is evident when in the process. Thus, within participatory photography, power is not always explicit or overt but can be concealed and embedded in the process itself and the status of those involved. One of the dangers, as Michel Foucault highlights in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1995), is that hidden power can lead to the manipulation and control of individuals and communities without their explicit awareness. When power is not easily identifiable, people may not realise the extent to which they are being influenced, which can limit their ability to exercise agency and autonomy. The danger lies in the fact that when power operates in hidden or less visible ways, it becomes more challenging to identify, challenge, and

resist. This is where PCVL can be a valuable framework for facilitators, organisers and participants to reflect and consider how this operates within a given framework.

The organiser or facilitator's background status as an artist, or lack thereof, within a project will often predetermine the value of the work and whether it will ultimately be deemed as art. The art world and art institutions wield a lot of power in defining what is considered art, as Burbridge rightly points out: "In the eyes of the art world, projects [participatory photography] are inconceivable without the vision, inspiration and commitment of the artist" (2020, p.127). This is made apparent if we look at the level of prominence and visibility of socially engaged artists versus that of their participants or collaborators. This can manifest simply through the font size of the artist's name against those of the participants, usually the latter being much smaller and invisible, once again resembling the well-known curatorial and institutional dilemmas. An alternative to this is "a project by", which aims to position the artist as an endorsement for the quality of the work and, in this way, ultimately validating the work as art.

Conversely, I have engaged in projects where no mention of my name was made, and this can be just as problematic because, as a facilitator, the influence within the process can be substantial. As an artist and facilitator, I feel a considerable degree of ownership and a sense of pride in what has been created. The only way to describe this is that we have worked hard together to create the work which I would have never been able to achieve by myself, and which is effectively the nature of my practice. While more questions are being raised than answers offered, practitioners and participants alike need to engage in a transparent, open and highly reflective mode of operation within these projects where PCVL can be helpful in asking and reflecting on the right questions. Embracing both the negative and the positive that comes with being transparent and the potential vulnerability that comes with it could challenge these power differentials and ultimately benefit both the participants and artists, as Bieke Depoorter has exhibited this level of transparency through her project *Agata*.

It is essential to note that this transparency extends to the language used and how the project is framed, which will make a substantial difference in how power dynamics play out within these projects. Moreover, differences of opinion, subjectivities, and biases will manifest in different ways depending on the people involved. Consequently, each project should be considered based on its own set of unique circumstances. Despite the enthusiasm that practitioners usually start out with, there will always be a significant learning curve based on the context and the power dynamics at play. Therefore, it is essential to be mindful that "Even the very best of intentions are sometimes unable to resist the effects of the institutional

structures in which projects are produced and consumed.” (Burbridge 2020, p.130). As one very experienced facilitator recently shared with me, “Whatever you do, you will probably never get it fully right.” there are always things that will be unexpected; things that will surprise practitioners that they had not previously considered; things to learn from and explore and ultimately do better in the future. These unique circumstances might make one decision right in one instance or completely wrong in another. Thus, we need to keep asking the right questions, even if we are not certain of the answers. This is where the PCVL model can become particularly beneficial.

Conclusion

“Collaboration is the Answer, but What is the Question?” Obrist poignantly asks (in Foster 2006 p. 158), and like in my dream recounted at the start of this thesis, *"I am still lost and frustrated. I seem almost to find it [participatory photography], but then it slips away"*. These statements sum up the beginning of this research journey and can be equally interpretative of its ending. An ending is a possibility to reflect on the beginning. An ending is also an opportunity for a new beginning. In a similar way to the digital reciprocal structure (Figure 54), which in some ways embodies this research, which is activated by temporality through a circular, iterative force marking many beginnings and many endings, each building upon the next and transforming its components further. With each iteration, like a centrifugal force, it has the potential to propel and disrupt things away from their original centre to create a different version of itself. Therefore, this ending marks the reconfiguration of its components in this iteration, raising new questions and offering a revived version of the same ones as at the start, which in turn acknowledges the need for the next new beginning.

In this way, this iteration of participatory photography and collaborative practice, at this point in time, contributes to the discussion of self-representation, young women and the use of networked images and participatory photography within networked spaces. The research does this first and foremost through the practice, which consists of an online exhibition of the work of the young women who participated as co-researchers in this project, as well as my reflective artistic contributions and through the curatorial process. Secondly, the research contributes to the practice of participatory photography by adapting and proposing the reflective model of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy (PCVL) within participatory photography, which builds upon the concepts of visual literacy and critical literacy to create a framework for consideration when planning and implementing a project of a collaborative nature. Finally, the research makes a contribution through the written thesis by contextualising and positioning the practice relative to other socially engaged practices, as well as a wider scholarly framework and by deriving and conceptualising a rationale for the PCVL reflective model.

The practice of this research constitutes the process of its production and the outcomes, which were derived through participatory photography workshops and the use of PCVL with a group of young women to form a final online exhibition, which can be viewed in a 3D and 2D format [here](#). These practical artistic outputs contribute in their own right through the experiences and the creative work that the young women created to questions related to self-representation,

gender inequalities, access to opportunities and the use of networked images and their interactions within networked images.

The artistic research contributes to the understanding of participatory photography practices as a whole through the relational process and production of the knowledge embodied within the work and the final exhibition of *Who Are These Women?*. Henk Borgdorff, in his book *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (2012), notes that "the experiences and insights that artistic research delivers are embodied in the resulting art practices and products" (2012, p. 148). He also suggests that artistic research practices are not only concerned with the production of new knowledge but also with new ways of knowing. The practice of this research directly contributes to *how* knowledge is embodied and generated within participatory photography through the application of the PCVL model of thinking.

The outputs of this artistic research highlight the young women's lived experiences. Therefore, the work aims to offer a critical view through the means of participatory photography production. The work "...invite[s] us to fundamentally unfinished thinking, and prompt us towards a critical perspective on what there is" (Borgdorff, 2012 p.148). Ultimately, the work directly contributes to a broader discourse on feminist media studies, gender inequality and the role of self-representation through the use of networked images within networked spaces as understood by and through the perspectives of this group of young women. Ultimately, as Borgdorff suggests about research art practices, this artistic research "creates room for that which is unthought, that which is unexpected – the idea that all things could be different." (2012, p.124). It is an invitation to think, question and discuss the topics that the young women have chosen to bring forward as part of this research through their produced body of work.

Research Aims

My primary interest in this research has always been invested in understanding participatory photography and the place of visual literacy within the process and, more specifically, how meaning is created through the photographs that are produced. This interest was also fuelled by the ubiquity of photography, introduced by new media and the camera phone and, therefore, the understanding of the place and direction of participatory photography and self-representation under these new conditions of networked space and networked images. Due to the timing of this PhD research, this critical part of my research practice ended up being conducted in the middle of the most prolonged lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, which

extended the boundaries of my primary research question to include online and remote delivery. This main inquiry led me to the development of the Participatory Critical Visual Literacy thinking model, which was used as a primary approach for conducting this research and represents one of the key contributions of knowledge for this research.

Women are disproportionately affected by unemployment, and postfeminist image representations can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles. Social media provides a space where women can perpetuate stereotypes or challenge them through the use of images. Therefore, my second aim for this research was based on a critical enquiry into the consumption and production of images in networked spaces and the implications of Participatory Critical Visual Literacy through the perspective of a group of young women who were not currently in full-time education or employment. My research aims have been guided by the critical interrogation of participatory photography and its application within networked spaces, the use of mobile phones and the possibility of remote delivery through the use of PCVL with a group of young women, as a way to understand self-representation and the role of the image in the process of precarity.

Key Findings and Contributions

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive review of the existing participatory and socially engaged photographic practices. It explores them from the perspective of ethnographic research as well as artistic practice, predominantly emerging in the West within the last century. The chapter provides key findings by highlighting some of the epistemic differences in engaging with participatory photography from these different disciplinary positions. It ultimately advocates for an ethical and artistically engaged interdisciplinary approach to participatory photography where practitioners are invited to learn from the strengths of these methodological differences rather than solely serving their own disciplinary agenda. The chapter raises questions on how artists can learn from the practices of ethnographers and how ethnographers can include artistic methods in a way that does not devalue or reduce the photographs created by the participants to merely data. The chapter concludes that the conceptualisation of PCVL, as adapted within this research, has the potential to bridge these epistemic differences.

Chapter 2 highlights the importance of the process as part of the practice of participatory photography. Building on existing ideas of visual literacy, critical literacy and reconceptualising ideas from critical visual literacy as applied in education, the chapter proceeds to derive the

rationale behind the methodological approach for this research by proposing the model of PCVL within socially engaged practice. The reciprocal structure is utilised as a metaphor and a thinking space to develop eight key areas for consideration when planning and doing a participatory photography project. The eight areas consist of creativity, context, self-representation, group work, critical reflection, analysis and interpretation, outputs and exhibitions, and transformation. PCVL offers a framework that conceptualises CVL beyond image interpretation and analysis to also foster reflexivity and self-awareness through group reflection in the image-making process.

I believe that utilising the model for PCVL is crucial for reflective thinking and planning in participatory photography. Central to the project's process and its potential for transformative impact, PCVL enables the production of research that is culturally meaningful and effective, as well as being valued as art. This model draws upon all relevant practices, as reviewed in Chapter 1, where it is ultimately proposed to bridge the gap between artists, who can engage with the methods and techniques of ethnography, and ethnographers, who must contend with the visual and aesthetic aspects of cultural representation. By collaborating or learning from each other's practices, they can create a more ethical, reflexive and artistically effective approach to participatory photography. PCVL directly contributes to the attempts of practitioners embarking on participatory photography projects, providing them with key questions for consideration for their own projects.

Chapter 3 focuses on positioning the young women's work within a broader context of feminism, photographic representation and networked spaces. The chapter presents several key findings based on the young women's work, including identity formation, the role of women in society, hidden labour and domestic spaces, echo chambers and networked images, the representation of young women within social media, and the commodification of the female body through digital images. A research participant from the project states in the feedback form about the workshops as a whole: "It really made me think and evaluate my work in a more attentive way. I'd only ever photographed people and this pushed me to seek other focus points, it was also incredibly introspective. Kallina's prompts really pushed you to think of themes that mattered. It opened up a whole new flow in me, a desire to experiment with the subject and meaning of a photograph rather than just pressing a button at something aesthetically pleasing."

Through the created work, the young women imply that they frequently feel pressured to 'perform' their identities in neoliberal environments in order to make their qualities and

abilities marketable. This may result in the development of a certain social media persona that embodies neoliberal notions of success and turns into a type of self-branding. Furthermore, the participants raise concerns about the commodification of young women's images, stating that "capitalism sells our image back to us", as seen in Figure 48. Thus, with the democratisation of photography through social media, networked images become complicit in this process, turning women's representations through images into commodities that can be instrumentalised and financialised. As another research participant notes in the feedback form: "Communication was definitely a big one. Thinking of the real-life impacts of the people and places you photograph, especially in a political/social sense. Also just how to convey a message in maybe a less obvious way, that was the best thing I learnt."

The young women's artistic work also highlights, on the one hand, how images serve to shape their understanding of themselves and how they can be used as counter-visual narratives to challenge power structures and the representation of gender. On the other hand, photographic self-representations without critical reflection, which PCVL aims to promote, can lead to reinforcing gender stereotypes by inadvertently repeating visual tropes that can perpetuate further gender disparity. Furthermore, networked images are now produced and consumed in ways that are influenced by capitalism and data extraction. This has challenged the traditional view of images as purely representational and made them into data points for machines. This duality of networked images has implications on how we understand their circulation and meaning in networked digital spaces, which is at the centre of current debates on culture, meaning, and value in digital spaces, which this chapter aims to contribute to.

Chapter 4 discusses and reflects on the practice and PCVL being conducted in networked spaces and highlights key ethical considerations relevant to participatory photography practices. The discussion is shaped through the second and third iterations of the reciprocal structures, which depict a whirlwind of hands and screens that create a portal in the shape of the structure. They embody the idea of participatory photography mediated through screens and mobile phones and aim to provide a sense of presence and connectedness. However, the key findings provide a sense that within remote delivery, this can be an illusion based on a partial version of what is really there.

Smartphone cameras enabled participation in online sessions for the *Who Are These Women?* workshops, even for those without computer access. While this didn't solve issues related to digital exclusion, it was a helpful workaround for those with access to a smartphone. However, using smartphone cameras and remote engagement can impact privacy and wellbeing. Some

participants struggled with having their cameras on at all times, and some workshops had to be shorter due to screen fatigue. Personal privacy in joining the sessions was not available to everyone, and the cameras on the phones had the potential to invade our private spaces. This ultimately created a different experience from in-person workshops. In the same vein, the virtual 3D exhibition, the decision for which was participant-led, rendered a similar dissatisfaction in terms of how it was experienced on the day of the virtual opening.

Finally, with technology and images embedded in our daily lives, the camera phone is likely to become the preferred tool for participatory photography projects and projects that rely heavily on technology require further exploration of the role that technological mediation plays, the risks involved, and the power distribution between humans and technology, which are potentially interesting future avenues for this research.

Limitations and Future Opportunities

Who Are These Women? relied heavily on technology and Instagram for participation and would have inadvertently excluded individuals who lack access to computers or digital devices, potentially contributing to the digital divide and further marginalising vulnerable populations. For instance, recruiting participants solely via Instagram would have excluded a range of young people who identify as women and non-binary individuals who cannot afford high-quality smartphones or have consistent internet access. This was not a deliberate omission but a limitation imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic that significantly impacted the recruitment criteria and posed even more challenges to accessing the most vulnerable and diverse participant demographics. The use of technology for remote participation also presented challenges for some participants in terms of privacy and confidentiality, and significantly impacted their ability to engage in the discussions. Therefore, the research does not intend to generalise all experiences of womanhood but rather to offer situated insights into this specific group of young women within networked spaces. These limitations underscore the need for future research to extend the methodologies developed here to more diverse participant groups, exploring the intersections of gender, identity, and photographic representation

Self-representation can inadvertently reproduce harmful narratives due to societal norms. PCVL can address limitations of self-representation by allowing reflection and discussion of unconscious biases and internalised power structures in the produced images. However, in

efforts to present ourselves in new ways, we must recognise that our counter-narratives may still contain traces of internalised stereotypes and visual tropes, as expressed by the work of some of the young women who participated in this research, as seen in chapter 3. The findings of this research allude to the idea that digital identities can both offer glimpses of liberation and be entangled in oppressive systems. In the digital age, our online images become less reflective of who we are and more of a reflection of who we aspire to be, who society expects us to be, and the marketable value of these images is a key insight that I have drawn through the work of the young women. This blurs the line between our true selves and their commodified, objectified counterparts. Therefore, my conclusion is that photography *is both the problem and potentially the solution to the problem of representation*.

The insights I have come to, based on this research, suggest that it is crucial for everyone involved in participatory photography projects to operate reflectively and transparently, embracing both the positives and negatives of the PCVL and participatory photography approach. Transparency also extends to language, remuneration, authorship and representation, which impact power dynamics, as discussed in Chapter 4. Each project is unique, so it is essential to consider its own set of circumstances and be open to unexpected surprises and learning opportunities. The PCVL model can be the right tool for asking the right questions, even if the answers are uncertain.

The future direction of this research can be to expand both as a concept and in practice on the PCVL model as a way to create an ethical and practical framework for understanding the use and production of images in participatory settings. Further exploration, specifically focusing on human and technological agency and power distribution, would also be an essential continuation of this research. The rise of text-to-image AI-generated images will further dismantle photography's relationship with reality and will need further investigation in a visually critical way. Geoff Cox's article "Invisual Literacy" (2022) explores the impact of machine learning and computer vision on visual literacy. In his essay on "Post-capitalist Photography" (2022), Ben Burbidge argues for the need to develop new forms of critical literacy to navigate the invisible within networked images. I believe Participatory Critical Visual Literacy will be an important model that can find new avenues and applications to address these emerging and pertinent questions within photography.

Pilot Workshops and Outputs

Through the pilot workshops, I could consider the recruitment criteria and test some of the new technology-related aspects, which included using mobile phones instead of giving participants point-and-shoot cameras and uploading them to an online image repository resembling a social media network. Subsequently, the learning from these pilot workshops was used to inform the design of this research's main set of workshops.

The pilot consisted of two groups of participants, which were set up in close proximity in terms of time, starting with the control group of students. The first group was a group of BA photography students who were, in theory, and somewhat in practice, well-versed in the world of photography and images, and the second was a group of unemployed and quite vulnerable young people between the ages of 17 and 20. The purpose of the two groups was to explore any differences in visual literacy and the levels of reflective engagement with photography by each group.

Both workshops consisted of activities including photography prompts, a photo scavenger hunt, discussions about photographs, visual literacy reflective sessions and editing and captioning activities. The outputs for both of these workshops consisted of a series of photographic work produced by each participant.

Pilot with Students Participatory Photography Workshops

The student workshops aimed to function as a control group in exploring levels of visual literacy. At this point, I had not developed the concept of PCVL yet and had not tested some of the assumptions about the technology before moving on to work with the group, which consisted of more vulnerable young people.

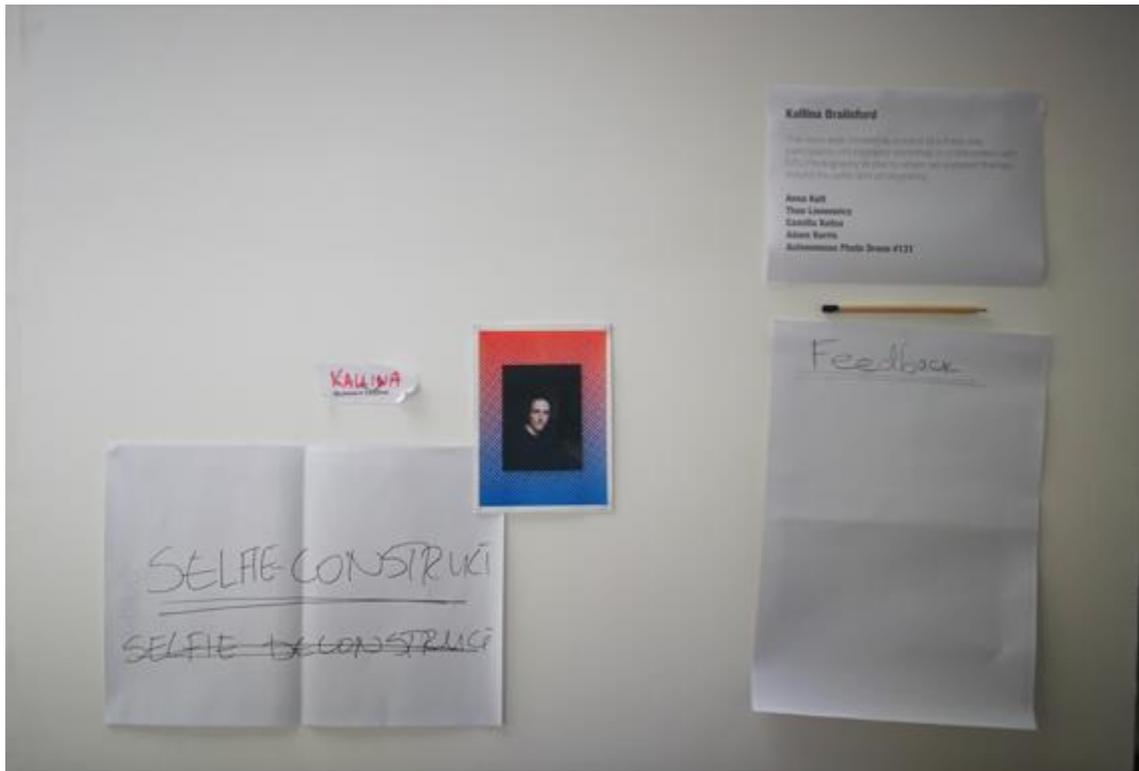


Figure 62 Selfie-Construct student exhibition as part of SummerLodge, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

A small group of photography students were recruited on a voluntary sampling basis through a call-out sent via internal emails on the BA photography course at Nottingham Trent University. Anyone enrolled on the NTU photography course was welcome to join on a first-come, first-served basis. The call-out included information about the workshops and was intended for students interested in the topics related to the research, which were advertised as exploring the sense of self and identity in relation to social media through photography.

The workshops were set up in June 2019 over three full consecutive days, starting in the morning and finishing in the afternoon with an hour lunch break. A suitable period towards the end of the academic year was identified when students had already completed all their assignments and were preparing to finish for the summer.

An initial mixed group of 7 participants responded to the callout via email, of which 6 showed up at the first session, and 5 attended all three full-day sessions of the workshops. This resulted in an attendance dropout rate of 20%, which falls within the expected range based on my previous experience.

The sessions started in the morning and finished in the late afternoon with an hour's lunch break. As the workshop progressed, the participants chose the topic of the central theme to work with, which was an exploration of their understanding of a selfie. We collectively came up

with the title 'selfie-construct', which also became the name of the project exhibition, which was exhibited a few days later at the artist residency SummerLodge 2019, which I was part of.

At the end of the workshop, all 5 of the participants had decided what they wanted to include as part of the exhibition and the exact display of their work. Very few of them were able to attend the actual exhibition opening because it took place a month later, and a lot of them had left Nottingham for the summer.



Figure 63 Overall layout of the student exhibition at SummerLodge, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

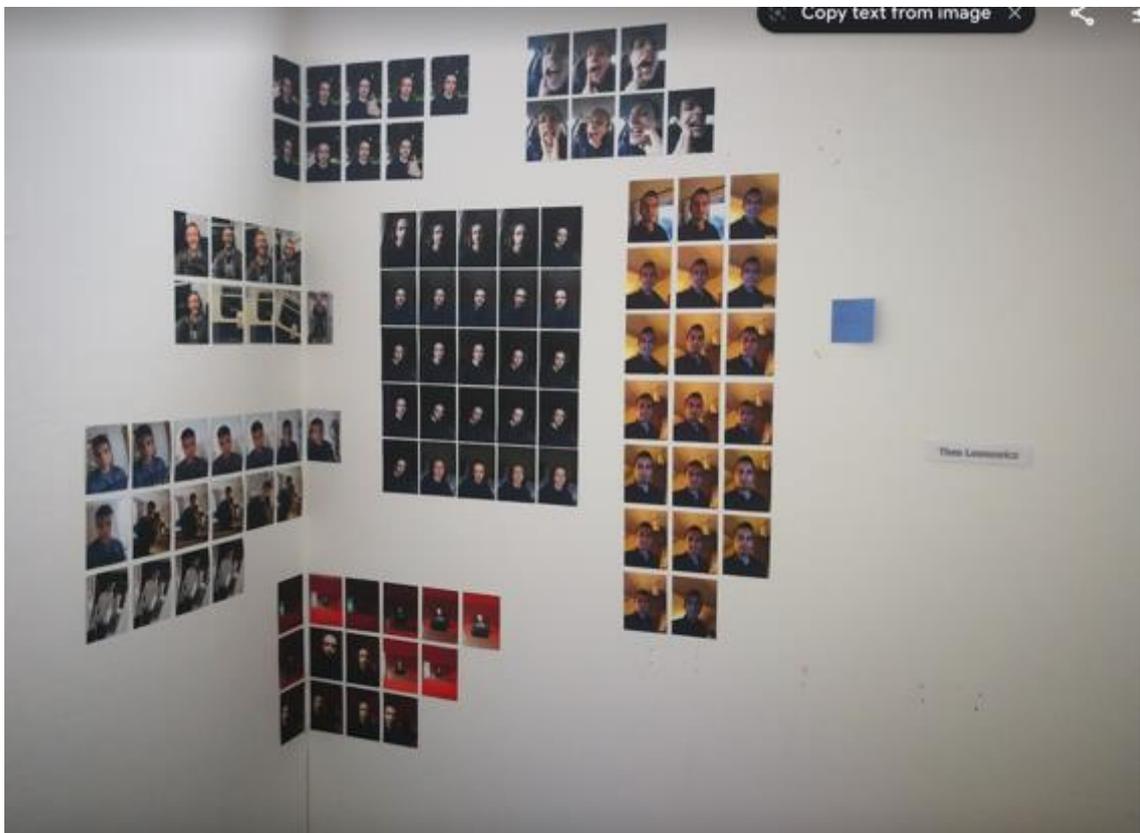


Figure 64 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 65 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 66 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

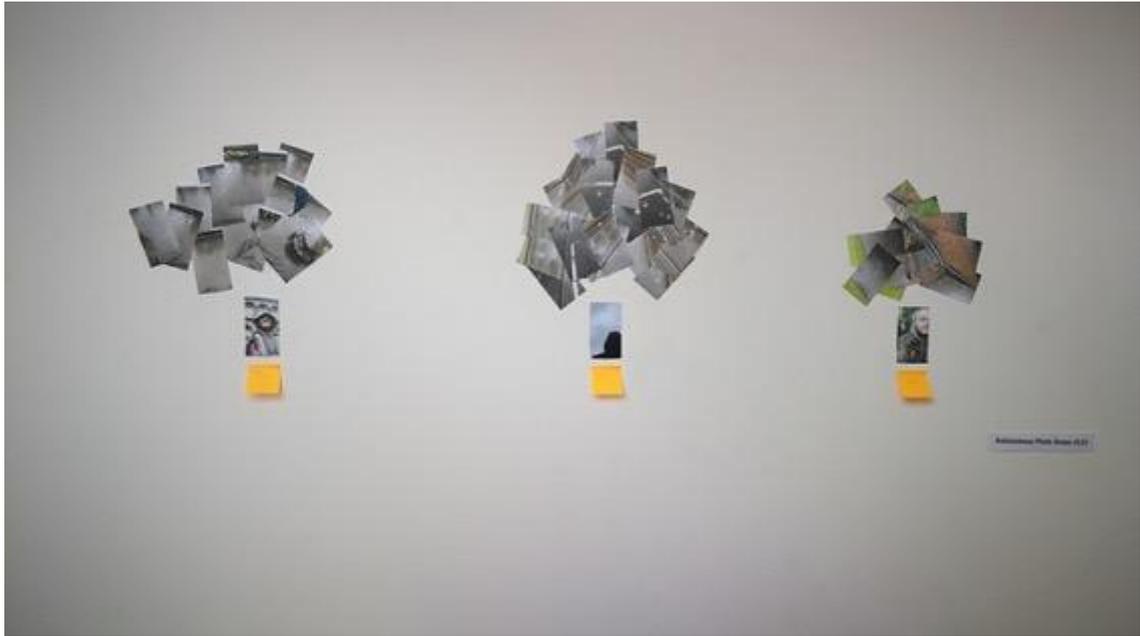


Figure 67 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

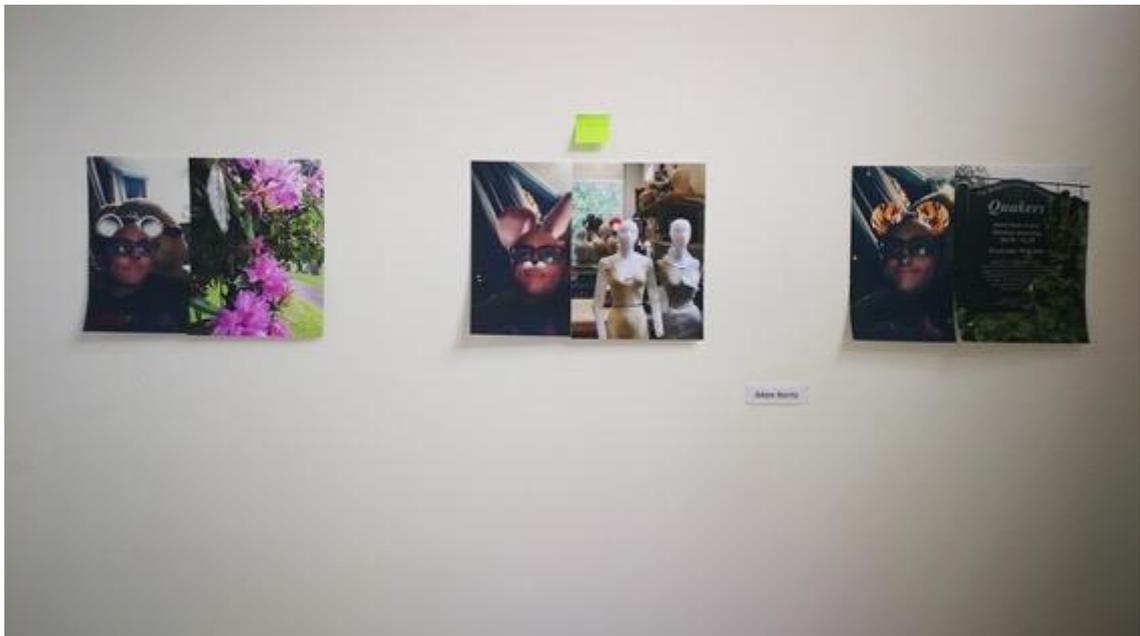


Figure 68 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 69 Participant's work from SummerLodge student workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

Pilot NEET young people Participatory Photography Workshops

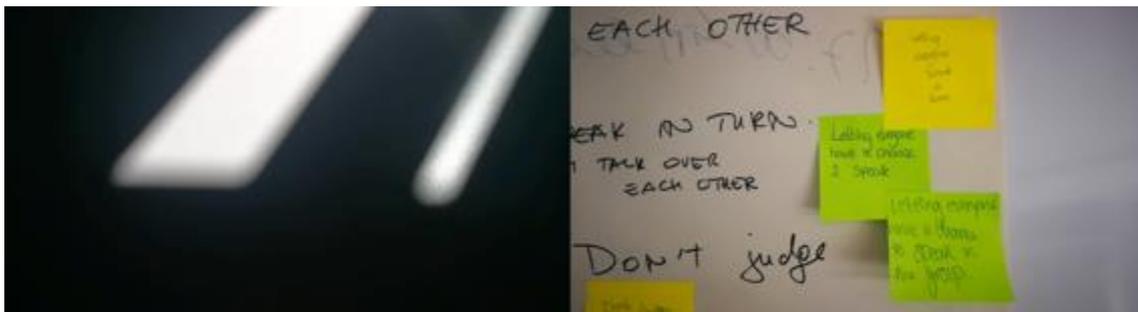


Figure 70 Screenshot and link to documentation video of the NEET workshop, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOeSrrk1MXU> [Accessed 23 November 2023]

The second workshop series was the main focus of the pilot study, and it included working with a group of young people who were not in full-time education, training or employment. The purpose of this workshop was to test the recruitment criteria for this participant group and to evaluate whether there are adjustments to be made in relationship to the identity markers of the participants. In addition to this, it was important to verify the workshop format, to consider the impact of the locality of the workshops and to test some of the assumptions related to the use of technology and visual literacy.

The recruitment was based on the following criteria:

- Young people between the ages of 17 and 21

- Young people not in full-time education, training or employment who lack opportunity and would be considered broadly 'vulnerable'
- Based in Nottinghamshire

The participants were recruited through careful consideration and a form of purposive sampling in partnership with local organisations in Nottingham that work and support vulnerable young people. Young people who met the criteria and were thought to potentially benefit from participating in the workshop programme were identified by the partner organisations.

A small group of 6 young people between the ages of 17 and 19 were selected to participate in the workshops, which included 4 people who identified as female and two people who identified as male. Most of the participants would be from what would be considered a very vulnerable background, ranging from individuals with poor mental health to those in care.

The workshops were set up in one of the photography rooms at Nottingham Trent University and were run over 4 consecutive days. The youngest participant attended the first session with their support worker, which was agreed upon ahead of the start of the workshops. 2 out of the 6 participants dropped out after the second session, and one more participant did not turn up to the last session, essentially not completing the course. This was a slightly higher dropout rate than expected, which was an important learning as part of the pilot - young people's retention rates are generally lower.

3 young people completed the workshops and finalised their work for an exhibition that was put up at the SummerLodge 2019 artist residency, a few days after the workshops. One of the participants was keen to help set up the exhibition, and a celebration and preview of the exhibition were organised for the friends and family of the participants.



Figure 71 NEET exhibition layout at SummerLodge, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 72 Participants' work from SummerLodge NEET workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 73 NEET workshops in progress, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 74 Participants' work from SummerLodge NEET workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 75 Participants' work from SummerLodge NEET workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford



Figure 76 Participants' work from SummerLodge NEET workshop exhibition, 2019, by Kallina Brailsford

Learning from Pilot Workshops

The pilot workshops offered important learning, which was helpful when considering the main set of workshops related to the recruitment criteria, use of technology, choice of location, dropout rates, safeguarding and the NEET category, length and structure of the sessions considering the attending demographic.

The recruitment criteria needed adjustments: The pilot highlighted that the recruitment criteria were loose and very broad. The NEET category is problematic, and defining it due to its contradictory characteristics proved to be complicated. Selecting people based on a broad 'vulnerability' that felt relevant to the project was challenging and somewhat unethical. A 30% increase in the number of people that are initially recruited would need to be considered as a contingency to make up for the higher dropout rates in young people.

The location of the workshops: The group dynamic and overall workshops were affected by where they were run. For the students, being in a room at the university created a power imbalance because they remained students. I inadvertently assumed the role of the lecturer, which would have affected how they participated in the project. For the NEET young people, coming to the university building was both intimidating and potentially inspirational, as most of them had not considered going to university or even going to college. Accessibility and how easy the location was to get to were also important considerations.

Design and length of sessions: The length of the workshops also needed to be considered as young people's attention span was shorter than expected, so a half-day workshop would be more fitting for this demographic. This was also applicable to the photo review activities, where more structure in terms of the number of photos shared by each person would be necessary so that other participants are able to stay focused. A safe sharing protocol, in addition to the ground rule, is important to avoid any situations of blurred boundaries and potentially triggering circumstances for participants.

Use of technology: All participants had phones that produced images of sufficient quality and were happy to use them. However, the diversity of the devices and their perceived value could be a potential prerequisite that will cause unnecessary competition and, therefore, affect the group dynamics. The second key point was creating a repository that was both easy to use and provided password protection for the participants' images. This proved harder than expected because Apple phones produced a different format of images (.heic), which is incompatible with many of the intended platforms. Creating a closed and safe space for sharing images that

do not utilise existing social media platforms like Facebook, which are not popular with this demographic and do not provide the highest levels of privacy, needs to be considered further. Uploading participant images to Google Photos was difficult and often did not work as intended.

Audio recording during sessions: Attempting to audio record sessions confirmed that it affects the dynamic within the group and should be avoided in the future.

Exhibition and celebration: The exhibition and celebration are a great way to finish a project, and participants enjoy it. In this instance, one of the participants was very sad because none of her family and friends came to share this moment with her, and this seemed to cause more distress than being a positive experience. Subsequently, who is present at the exhibition and how the event is organised should be important considerations.

Safeguarding protocols: Based on some of the interactions with one of the participants at the end of the first day of the NEET workshop, additional support mechanisms and safeguarding protocols need to be put in place during the recruitment process in collaboration with partners that put people forward for participation.

A fixed framework would be ineffective: After having delivered the two pilot workshops, I realised that a fixed framework would have been to the detriment of the workshops, and perhaps this was a really important realisation in the development of PCVL as the two sets of workshops were very different from each other and other projects I had previously organised. A list of questions, a thinking space, and overall themes to consider, rather than a fixed framework, is what is needed.

Appendix B – Copies of Consent Forms

The research and workshops were delivered in line with the ethical standards of NTU and have been approved by the JOINT INTER COLLEGE ETHICS COMMITTEE (JICEC) of the College of Art, Architecture, Design and Humanities; College of Science and Technology and the Centre for Academic Development and Quality (CADQ). Nottingham Trent University is committed to respecting the ethical code of conduct of the United Kingdom Research Councils. Thus, in accordance with procedures for transparency and scientific verification, the University will conserve all information and data collected during your interview or workshops in line with the University Policy and RCUK Common Principles on Data Policy (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/datapolicy/>) and the relevant legislative frameworks. The final data will be retained in accordance with the Retention Policy. All data will be anonymised and made available to be reused in this form where appropriate and under appropriate safeguards.

Consent Form Templates:



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