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## **Extending and provoking knowledge by photo-essays: a research-based art**

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What kind of knowledge is being produced and how it can be discussed? Considering that "art is about doing at the same time as one creates what to do and how to do it" as Pareyson (1984, p. 32) says; we ask in what sense does the photo-essay work as a trigger of thinking and as a way to build knowledge. Is it possible to understand how this process occurs?

In this essay, we are interested in analyzing how images are configured as triggers for thought and knowledge, which is itself magnified by the very production of images. This analysis led to researches that are not restricted to artists or to artistic research (AR), but are driven by the *poiesis* of the researcher in art, education and culture, as it was argued in our last presentation at the 2nd Conference in Granada 2014.

Our purpose in this present essay is to focus especially on the use of photo-essays as an artistic research methodology, with reference to the studies of Joaquin Roldán and Ricardo Marin-Viadel (2012) and also to our own practice at the post graduate program of Education, Art and Cultural History of Mackenzie University (São Paulo, Brazil).

Rita Demarchi photographs series that integrate her doctoral research about museums and cultural institutions, showing a careful process of registering silence and lurking in the universe that surrounds the connoisseur, the works of art and exhibition spaces. This way of capturing situations requests a constant openness to the phenomena which is one of the characteristics of artistic creation. The images are legitimized as they are a full demonstration of how images are able to trigger our thinking and produce connections between theoretical research and writing. The curatorial work of going over the pictures taken, selecting them and assembling them into photo-essays has allowed Rita to go beyond the thought about art and led her to an unveiling of relationships and issues about the complexity of the territory concerned, which as we think, would not come to light otherwise.

Olga Egas promotes personal and collective student's productions as well as cultural expeditions that together compose photo-essays of shared experiences and instigate aesthetic sensibility on these future teachers. Her doctoral research aims to use photo-essays as a way to keep the students and the teacher in a state of attention and invention and enable the construction of subjectivities. She also aims to investigate how photo-essay may constitute as a device to read and interpret the world and recreate other practices to handle the objects and events that we believe are an indispensable condition to the practice of any teacher.

We present a brief analysis of these photo-essays and processes that involve the attempt to improve the understanding of ABR and reflect on the plural forms and the consequent expansion of ways to produce and disseminate knowledge. A new way to produce, organize and disseminate research and knowledge, which challenges the traditional and legitimized way of being in the academy.

**Keywords:** Art based research, photo-essay, research methodologies, art.

**Keyimages:**



We opened here a gap to think about the knowledge that is being produced bringing us to the question of the use of the image in academic research. Images to propagate art or the process of creation itself. Images for illustration of facts or concepts. Images produced to build knowledge, to generate thoughts about art, education and culture. In this general scope, we focus on the production of photo-essays as generators and drivers of thought and knowledge.

After an arduous struggle, creation processes and works of art are common in renowned Brazilian universities in the lines of research of visual poetics. Words and images intersect to build the theoretical and poetic knowledge, consolidating the artistic research (AR) and are developed primarily by artists. But the images are not always present as a visual text, and they are not always recognized as a specific and relevant source of knowledge. They are often

considered only as illustrations. It's possible to see still in some universities where images are presented only as attachments in academic texts.

In this article, we are interested to analyze how the images are configured as triggers for thought, as drivers of knowledge that are amplified by their own production of images. Doctoral thesis, dissertations and articles, expanded by the theoretical references of ABR or even without the adoption of its methodologies, have been seeking ways to build and disseminate their research having the art, its language and its processes as structuring elements. These researches are not restricted to the artists, but are driven by the *poiesis* of the researcher, just as we noted in our communication in the 2nd Conference in Granada in 2014, based on Passeron (1997), Pareyson (1984) and Berger (1974), in addition to the specific authors of methodologies, especially Roldan & Marin-Viadel (2012).

### **1. Photo-essays as triggers to think?**

Images. Images. Images. They have stepped into our texts as amalgamated elements to the ideas that compose them. How far can they only illustrate concepts making them visible?

Recently we followed the dissertation of the construction process: "What happens to the survey when Art takes the lead? Potential of Arts-based research" of Jade Magave (2014), at the Post-graduate Program in Education, Art and History of Culture. Driven by artistic productions made on her Masters degree – class narratives, final evaluation of course taken through a portfolio or even the creation of an audiovisual review book – Jade decided to study the art-based research. During her studies, she always brought up the issue: would the art be a result of communication through giving visibility to ideas and concepts or it could actually boost the construction of knowledge bringing issues and expanding concepts in the very act of searching?

Upon completion of her dissertation, Jade reveals another perception that overcomes the initial concerns about the art-based research. The visual and verbal narratives made by her during the research, says Jade (2014, p. 152), is shown as "a way of making me think about the broader relationship between art and research, creation processes and research processes without however, providing me the conclusive answer that I wanted". She discovered in her own process of creation that the art-based research proposes more questions than answers and that it opens up new possibilities to face the problems and challenges of the research. Living a

creative process with the production of narratives, comics and visual graphics within the research, provided her with other learning experiences that perhaps without art, it would not have been possible. Not only did the art communicate her thoughts, but it also expanded them. This is what she writes in the last line of his dissertation, answering the question that gives the title to her work: "What happens to the research when art takes the lead? It expands itself." (MAGAVE, 2014, p. 153).

The expansion caused by the methodology in the art based research could be provoked in many ways. One of them is the photograph, not as documentation tool used extrinsically - visual image as a data, but intrinsically as a model of visual thinking - visual image as an idea. Roldán says (2012, p. 44):

Using the photograph intrinsically is to consider it as a way of discourse with notable aesthetic qualities, which not only does it show something but it also simultaneously interprets what it is represented and through it, it is able to formulate questions in depth, to describe situations, to advocate ethical positions or to achieve reasonably justified conclusions.

The author alerts, however, that the photograph becomes a method of investigation when it is a substantial part of the inquiry process. In this sense, the photo-essays add systematically to the investigation process the possibility of a visual narrative. Viadel and Roldan say (2012, p. 78): "The Photo-Essays mainly serve to expose a visual argument because they exploit to the full the narratives and demonstration possibilities of the images, and not only his figurative or representational functions."

Visual arguments that weave discoveries, which engender concepts that offer other points of view. There is also an important aspect in the construction of photo-essays: the choice of the pictures that compose a photo-essay. Photographing or composing with images, intentional choices involve long processes of reflection, conceptualization, instigating us to problematize the thinking itself. That's what we can see in the photo-essays of Rita Demarchi and Olga Egas in their research processes.

How do they photograph? Do they choose to do it with a pre-set argument or are these arguments revealed in the act of shooting and making the choices of the photos?

Studies about creation processes show that the artist begins his work with an amorphous intuition, mirage, concept or general premise and moves in this direction. For Salles (2011, p. 37) the trends are "undefined, but the artist is loyal to this vague situation. The work goes toward a greater understanding of what someone wants to elaborate. The trend itself doesn't present the concrete solution to a problem, but it indicates the direction".

Is that what happens to the production of photo-essays? Do vague situations, amorphous intuitions, concepts or general premises move the researcher in the act of shooting as well as composing each photo-essay? In that sense, are the photo-essay triggers of thinking and also a way to build knowledge? How do these processes occur?

## 2. Crossing the penumbra, by Rita



Rita Demarchi. *Penumbra I*. Photo-essay from the work of Olafur Eliasson. *Your body of work*. São Paulo, Sesc Pompéia, 2011.



Rita Demarchi. *Penumbra II*. Photo-essay from the work of José Luís Neto. *High Speed Press Plate*, 2006. Lisboa, Museu Berardo, 2014.

In my case, photographs clicked in museums and cultural institutions compose my doctoral research that is about to be finished (which for now has the title of "See someone who sees"). I have been searching a careful process of lurking and silence in the universe that involves the visitors, the works and the exhibition spaces.

This way of capturing the instants requires a constant openness to the phenomena. When I step into the exhibition space, I have some ideas in mind, an amorphous intuition, but I try to let go of categories or concepts for making photos with characteristics of "gratuity" and freedom, typical of artistic creation ... Of course I carry with me everything that I have seen, everything that I have ever come across, read, written and shared. However in order to photograph you must somehow "forget" them. I try to forget them to be able to overcome the temptation of searching for images that would merely serve to illustrate or endorse concepts and theoretical connections made previously. On the contrary, I note that the images themselves, legitimized as full expressions of knowledge, instigate my thoughts to the theoretical connections that I have been studying and writing about. In some issues, the images allowed to deepen and expand things in a way that I already suspected.

After the shooting experience, the curatorial work of dwelling on the captured images, selecting and assembling them into photo-essays has allowed the unveiling of relations and questions about the complexity of the territory studied. I believe that this deepening of thinking about art brings some issues that would not come to light otherwise - eg specific issues of contemporary art, diversity of visitors' attitudes, affection involving the visitors, the landscapes built by the relationship between bodies, works and spaces, difficulties and potential of encounter with art in these spaces.

Penumbra. In this article I focus on a specific issue that is not the heart of the work, but I considered it relevant and it was intensified by my experience at an installation: the various difficulties surrounding an in-depth encounter with art. I discuss in my thesis that the fact that the visitor has gone through the gates and entered the art exhibition, the fact of being in front of the work does not guarantee that he really experienced it. There are several factors that may hinder or prevent it from actually seeing and experiencing it. Factors related to contemporary culture and way of life, such as the spectacular nature of exhibitions, consumer relationship that extends to cultural assets, the dispersion, the rush, the "tourist" superficial glance, the difficulties facing the art itself is the past and present and even the act of underestimating the meeting "face to face". I base the initial part of the thesis with authors such as Bauman (2001), Hall (2005), Baudrillard (1991), and I also take into account my experience with fellow teachers and student groups. Looking at these pictures that I bring in the photo-essays and others has helped me to think better about these factors that constitute more or less dense obstacles to see in which we are all affected in some way. I started to call them "penumbra", formulated and named a concept. Hope I'm not being presumptuous, but I had never imagined it would, and I'm happy for the decisive experience I had with the work of Olafur Eliasson in 2011. My photos from

his work led me to what I think is the right word. As *Your body of work* seems so fair as the title for his installation.

Well, if I devote myself only on the theory about these strenuous points, I would be led to a very pessimistic view, and I would not be able to see the possibility of a deep encounter with the work. However, while I analyze my photographs, narratives that do not get tired of seeing and rearranging, my whole body awakens to the memory of the experience with the work. Thus, I realize that if the penumbra is undeniable, it is through it that we can find the power to enjoy art, to share with fellow travelers, to let yourself be caught by it, just like the children do when they are experiencing it. This opens a door to reflect on sensitivity and aesthetic experience. I had to go through the penumbra and understand it, before I reached the heart of the work, along with Maffesoli (1998), Bachelard (2008), Ferreira Santos (2005) and others.

In 2014, a series of José Luís Neto photographs displayed in the Berardo Museum in Lisbon drew my attention and more than that, I was fascinated with the game that expanded from these images that involved space, visitors and other works displayed. These works allowed me to capture new landscapes. Landscapes whose protagonists connect to the other photos with the work of Eliasson. Landscapes that once again reveal something important about the power of the meetings, in addition to the penumbra.

Regarding the thesis as a whole, to its writing and configuration, it is necessary to do a format that does not fit the conventional standards. The work asks that we need to give proper voice to poetic and metaphorical images and words and not to hide my involvement, my affection for the object of the research.

In my research, the photo-essays as affective and cognitive narratives are of fundamental importance, as they enabled me to build and express my own and expand my thinking on multiple connections from the photographs and also from the curatorial exercise - selection and grouping of different images, surrounded by endless possibilities.

The doctoral thesis was configured also as an opportunity to start recreating artistically, something that had been buried for years by the teacher's office. Besides that, I hope that with my own words, images and especially my photo-essays, I can share with the reader what I consider to be the most valuable thing: the aesthetic experience.

### 3. A essay about photo-essays, by Olga



Olga Egas. *Blues*. Photo essay, in 2014, consisting of three digital pictures taken during the visit of students to the exhibition *Tears of St. Peter*, Vinicius S.A.



Olga Egas. *Between looking*. Photo essay, 2014, digital photographs taken during the visit of the students to the art exhibit *Soturno Walker* of Oswaldo Goeldi.



Olga Egas. *Try out*. Photo essay, 2014, consists of digital photographs taken during the visit to the art exhibition *Soturno Walker* of Oswaldo Goeldi.

Three photo-essays. We can see in them, the personal and collective productions of students and cultural expeditions that we did together. They were meant to compose photo-essays of shared experiences and instigate the aesthetic sensibility of the students, who are the teachers-to-be. They reflect in my doctoral thesis research that intends to use photo-essays to keep the students and the teacher in a state of attention and invention and enable the construction of subjectivities. We investigated how the photo-essay can be an academic tool to read and interpret the world and reinvent other practices for dealing with objects and events, a condition that we believe is essential to the work of any teacher.

We have examined the possibilities of making visible the experiences in class. We have tried to leverage the images making them arguments for themselves. Thus, we worked through in this research about the production of photo-essays. What can we learn from these images? Do the selected images build a significant visual narrative about the situation experienced? How and when do the photo-essays become instruments to reflect on the artistic knowledge and on the teaching and learning issues of art in different social and cultural contexts?

We take cultural expeditions in the spaces outside the University to cultivate the sensitive and the aesthetic look of the students. In contact with contemporary Brazilian art works and the last century, between installation and woodcut, we enjoyed looking at the art without any haste, as perceived by Rita in her work. That was the motivation for the production of my photo-essays after these visits. It was a difficult task to select among many images, those that could form the experience lived collectively. These images were presented to students in

the completion of the course. They will be the source for some new thinking expanded by the students. When the students build their own photo-essays, are they actually describing, analyzing and revealing what they lived under a new point of view? It will be interesting to analyze how the photographic images – during this time where many people are taking “selfies” – encourage students to a visual thinking, enabling them to make decisions about the image, the symbols and the connections they can establish with other images.

By reviewing the pictures taken during the classes, we can realize the pedagogical attitude and the reaction of the students. We can also create different cultural experiences, enabling the students to broaden their cultural references. We also want to awaken them to the habit of experiencing the culture, to the cultivation of the self, as sentient beings, creators and producers of culture. The photo-essays can help us on this mission.

#### **4. Considerations in state of germination...**

There are several ways in which Rita and Olga has worked with his photo-essays. For Rita, the raw material is the observation and silence. No physical approximations or words exchanged with the protagonists of the photos. For Olga happens the opposite: students who will become teachers live with her an educational process. If these photo-essays have diverse content, there are common aspects in searching of authorship, also in the significant developmental processes in their research and in their creative processes.

In these photo-essays and other experiments, we see the importance given to the act of shooting and compose the photo-essays, with delicate processes of choices and decision-making. Each photo-essay is a game, a building, an opportunity to realize curatorial images, narratives connected to one or more concepts, and ask us for a look that is not frozen or compartmentalized. Ask for a look that is able to select and handle multiple open in each image and that intensifies when more images come over.

These findings lead us to initiate a study about Aby Warburg, his library and his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which offered the visual structure of his thought. We can consider that Warburg was a curatorial precursor nonlinear and multiple in terms of images and concepts involved. His series of images was not intended as an argument illustrated by images, but a sequence of images informed by an argument, as Didi-Huberman tells us (2013, p. 386). Is it the same with photo-essays? Their images and the relationships between them suggest arguments

that extend the thinking and knowing?

The answers to these questions seems to be affirmative and instigate us to continue to research on and about photo-essays since the methodologies based on the art produces an expansion of academic rigor. Shakes the traditional "sure" up and emphasized the "certainty of art".

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