

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY AND BLINDNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF A/R/TOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This article describes a photography project in the context of a/r/tography as an Arts-Based Research (ABR) methodology, in order to discover the connections between photography and blindness. Those pictures taken under blind perception invite us to discover another conception of visuality and therefore to enrich our own perception.

Thanks to an affiliation with the ONCE (Spanish National Organisation for the Blind) and its Madrid Regional Office for Department of Culture, which kindly enabled us to work with blind and visually impaired people, we performed a range of project work within the blind community. One such project comprised designing a photography workshop as a collaborative learning setting for blind people. We carried out different activities involving reading and creating pictures, in which, each participant assumes the role of spectator and creator, where images and words interrelate.

Photographs turn into visual narratives spun through an experience. Their words give voice to the sets of images, creating some extraordinary readings. Photographs taken by blind people reveal how a visual creation can be a means of communication between those who see and those who do not.

Keywords: collaborative experience, a/r/tography, photography and blindness

1. Background and theoretical approach

Before describing our research experience, we want to introduce two key issues that we considered during the development and design of the project, which place our study on the panel of challenging Fine Arts pedagogies.

The first aspect is to define the methodological approach of our project. On the one hand, Arts-Based Research opens up the possibility of using different strategies that allow us to delve into the imagination of blind people. On the other hand, *a/r/tography* combines art, education and investigative research as a whole.

The second aspect is to reflect upon the identity of the artist and how this figure can incorporate other identities. Artistic creation must be understood beyond the individual process and conceived from collaborative and participatory perspectives. To this end, we will provide some references of artistic and collaborative projects undertaken with blind communities.

1.1. *A/r/tography* as a method to investigate visual images from the perception of blindness

A/r/tography is an Arts-Based Research methodology interested in looking for new and sustained relationships between subjects and languages, which are implemented during the research process. To explain some of the key aspects of this type of ABR, we will allude to the term itself. On the one hand, its name contains the concepts of art and graphy, which suggest the importance of the relationship between the visual and the textual as pathways through which one explores and reflects. On the other hand, the term *a/r/t* is related to the identities of the artist, the educator and the researcher. According to Irwin (2006), none of these aspects overshadow the others, but rather are produced simultaneously within a spatial and temporal context (Irwin, 2006, p.70).

In the case of some of the artists that we will study, the issue of identity is raised; particularly the role of relationships between all those involved who shape the learning process.

Whether I was teaching or photographing, the crucial part of my artistic process was human interaction. What was it, finally, that I was doing? Was it some kind of visual anthropology? Was it education? Photography? Could I combine these elements and be an artist too? Was there something less artistic about my work as a teacher than a photographer? (Ewald, 2000, p.325)

The a/r/tographer has a triple identity, in which through artistic experiences, research and learning, rhizomatic relations are produced, destabilising any hierarchical structure that might allow one identity to prevail over another.

Our project is especially concerned with the concept of a/r/tography as a methodology of situations for probing into the relationship between blindness and photographic creation. This collaborative proposal aims to involve everyone who participates in the process, both inside and outside of the photography workshop. We endeavour to provide a reflection and thereby generate new meaning, which offer answers and pose new questions. This idea is related to the concept of the rhizome as an epistemological model, as defined originally by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), represented metaphorically through the image of crabgrass that "connects any point to any other point" by growing in all directions (as cited in Irwin, 2006, p.71).

The concept of the rhizome is perfectly suited to the type of relationship that arises in the visual approach of our study. On the one hand, the connections between the photographs are not only linked to their referent, but also to other

aspects that go beyond the sensory, enriching their content and bringing greater significance to the set of images. On the other hand, interpretations roused by the same image clearly demonstrate the relationship between the visual and the textual. The participants' identities are reflected in their creativity, and connections with their individual experiences arise both spontaneously and unconsciously.

1.2. The identity of the artist and the role of the spectator as the creator. Photography in collaborative projects

We have seen how the role of the artist shares an identity with the figures of the educator and researcher. However, the artist must also pause to consider the relationship between the viewer and the object of art.

The artist endeavours to look beyond the creativity and aesthetic qualities of an artwork, to consider how the public should interact with the piece of art itself. Current artistic trends suggest that the viewer is more than just a mere observer and that the artist should be implicated in the public's reception of the artwork. This shift has increasingly led to the spectator being considered as an active participant, capable of constructing meaning, and even being involved in the creative process. This approach calls for a redefinition of the artist's identity, as well as a collaborative and participatory conception of the creative process.

We selected three artistic projects as points a reference. These serve not only to understand blindness from the perspective of visual creation, but also to conceive creativity from a collaborative standpoint. Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See (2008) by Javier Téllez, Les Aveugles (1986) by Sophie Calle and much of the work of Wendy Ewald. According to Palacios (2009), such proposals, also known as community art, have two key features. The context, whether physical or social, for

finding meaning in an autonomous object, and an interest in discovering new ways of involving the public in the work of art (Palacios, 2009, p.199).

Tellez, Calle and Ewald interpret the process of creation of an artwork within the context of collaboration and participation, in which these rhizomatic relationships arise, and which lead a project along unexpected paths that have been shared and agreed upon by the participants. Tellez (2011) explains how from a starting point, in the form of an idea that is given to the members of a group, a piece of an artwork is generated and proceeds to evolve unpredictably. The artistic product becomes a collaborative creation and the spectators are transformed into active creators of the artwork.

The role of the artist seems to reflect this shared identity in which a reciprocal relationship emerges. This is an open relationship that generates situations, so that the already accustomed spectators become active members of the project. Generally, in this type of work, defined as community arts, the participants belong to a particular collective or community. The artist decides upon a meaningful context to confer an idea and then acts as a mediator in the formation of relationships, which gives rise to a collaborative art project. Taking the classification of communities described by Kwon (as cited in Palacios, 2009) as a reference, Calle and Téllez's projects are especially identified with communities that are formed specifically for the project and then disappear upon project completion. In the case of Ewald, we find certain projects that unlike the aforementioned, do offer continuity, being converted into independently and autonomously managed spaces. In this regard, Ewald describes how the assistant, as a member of the community or social context, has a decisive role, not only as a cultural and sometime linguistic mediator with community members, but also taking responsibility for giving viability and continuity to the developed project (Peña, 2011, p.217).

In our case, our hope is that the photography and blindness project does not end, but instead leads to the discovery of further channels and connections for continued research and learning.

We must be aware that it is the communities themselves that set the guidelines for how we should interact with their members, and above all, what measures to take should any unexpected situations arise. Ewald usually works with communities at risk of social exclusion, through which she tries to involve and engage both participants and members of the community.

We have specifically chosen Tellez and Calle's projects due to their work with groups of blind people, and also because they are concerned with the relationship between blindness and visibility.

Les Aveugles (1986) was an art project undertaken in collaboration with a group of blind people, in which Sophie Calle asked the participants to describe their concept of beauty. Following this, Calle photographed these ideas, turning them into images, although on some occasions, the blind participants themselves created these images. The photographs, together with the descriptions of the concept of beauty, were displayed next to a frontal portrait of each of the blind participants. Determining a concept of beauty is a key issue in this project, through a consideration of how this visual concept is used to construct different kinds of readings when sight is excluded.

Letter on the Blind For the Use of Those Who See (2008), performed with six blind people, recreates an Asian version of Plato's Cave, the story of the six blind men and an elephant. Inspired also by the work of Diderot (2002/1749), which bears the same title, Tellez aims to bring into the 21st century a contemplation that still

exists today; understanding how blind people perceive the world as a way to gain a deeper comprehension of our own visual perception. The display proposal of this

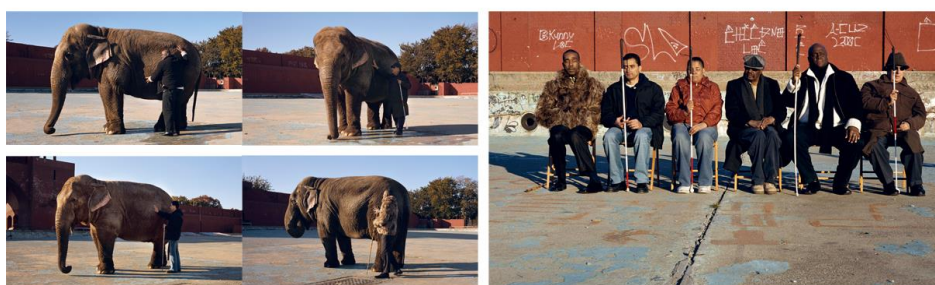


Fig 1. Javier Téllez. Series of *The Elephant and the Blind Men*. 2008. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

study provides a sculptural recreation of the elephant based on the experiences described by each of the participants.

Having examined these projects, we must stress Ewald's (2011) contribution as a point of reference of interest, due to her methodological approaches and didactic contributions to photography. It is especially worth highlighting the contributions made with the Literacy Through Photography programme (LTP) carried over a period of twenty years in Durham Schools in North Carolina, as well as projects such as *Black Self/White Self* (1994-1997). This programme incited the creation of curricular and interdisciplinary projects based on photography.

2. Development of a photography project for a group of blind participants

2.1. Introduction and project justification

At first glance, the relationship between photography and blindness may seem to be a contradictory notion, because the photograph implies the need to see. However, the relationship between the visual image and blindness proposes another way of understanding the process of creating photographs without any visual references.

We can conceive photography through another type of sensory experience, as is the case with the photographs of Gerardo Nigenda. However, beyond that which is perceived through the senses, we come across another type of image constructed from mental images or sketches that originate from ideas constructed in our inner selves. Perception, in the absence of vision, is always present because it is the way in which we connect with the outside world and become aware of our experiences. Cognition allows us to assimilate and understand what is perceived in order to generate our ideas and thoughts about what we experience.

Our experimental proposal aims to bring photography to a group of blind and visually impaired individuals. This experience is a definitive step in the whole cultural immersion process that we have been undertaking with the group participants from the ONCE since 2011. During all of this time, we have entered their daily activities, participating in the activities offered by the Department of Adult Attention, Culture and Leisure of the ONCE Madrid Regional Offices.

From the activities on offer, those that had some relevance to cultural and artistic training were selected. In this way, we have established initial contact with these individuals in order to learn about their interests and the resources that they

use to function on a day-to-day basis, and to observe the interactions between the participants during each activity. Carrying out this observation is important in order to begin to define the profile of the people who will participate in our workshop.

During and after this cultural immersion with the members of the ONCE, we prepared discussion areas in order to carry out a deeper study of our research topic, and to confirm what interest or predisposition they have for images and photography in their daily lives.

2.2 Objectives

Our objective is to bring photography to a group of visually impaired individuals and together construct an alternative way of conceiving visual creations based on their personal experiences.

The proposal is in line with a/r/tography by giving participants a creative space, dialogue and interaction, thereby blurring the gap between sighted and blind people. In fact, the project is about creating learning spaces that will allow us to investigate the relationships between photography and blindness, as well as foster an interest in art and the visual for the blind community.

The main objectives were as follows:

- To awaken an interest in photography as a way to express and communicate through images.
- To learn different strategies to make reading pictures accessible.
- To use photography as a way of developing their perception, imagination and creative ability.

- To create a piece of photographic artwork based on their personal experiences.
- To convert photographic creations into spaces for reflection and exchange, as well as a point of communication between those who see and those who do not.

2.3. Developing the photography workshop

With our workshop, we want each participant to have the role of both spectator of images, and creator of a piece of personal artwork. The purpose is to broaden the culture of vision, and to discover to what extent artistic creation enables the blind to enrich their perception of vision. During the planned sessions, each participant becomes both spectator and creator.

When the blind participants are given the role of spectators, it is important to involve them in the reading of images through descriptions, or, dialogues that allow them to mentally reconstruct what is described.

One of the initial approaches to the visual was to provide them with photographs that would connect both with their interests and our theme: a trip. Photographs inspire and remind us of a certain place and become objects of desire that transport us to that space, and allow us to relive the sensations and emotions concealed within the photograph.

Reading images provides us with strategies to understand the visual through the use of language, which go from the denotative to the connotative. Visual images are described through touch or words, so that blind people can mentally represent the photograph. In this regard, we could not agree more with the following statement by Dewey:

For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those, which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art (Dewey, 1980/2008, p.62).

From spectators to creators of photographs. Inspired by our last trip, each participant must mentally travel to a visited place of which they keep memories. A trip helps them to think visually and to look carefully for other pictures that are alive in their memories. Our proposal hopes to become an integral experience, taking this concept as it was defined by Dewey (2008). A concept in which practical, emotional, and intellectual stages are organized in a dynamic way of the experience. There is a beginning, a process and a commitment to achieve a personal growth in ones own experience.

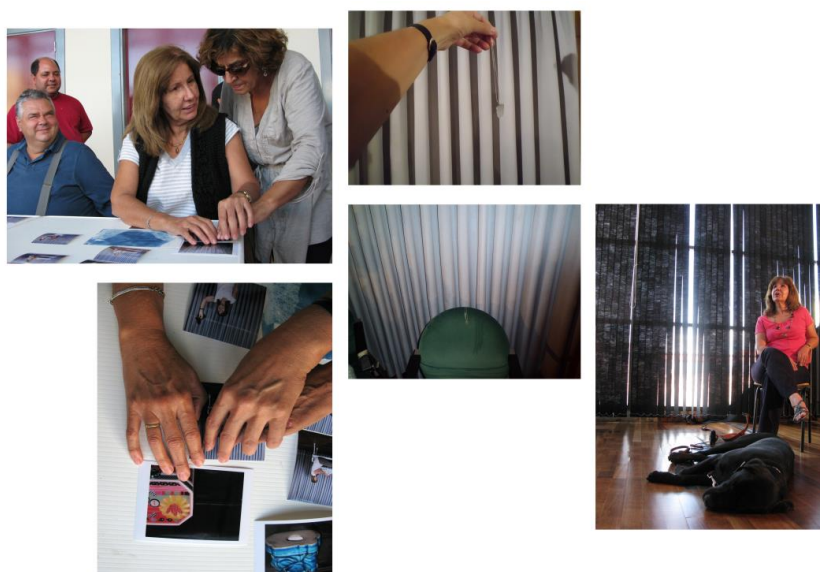
During the following sessions, photograph-based activities were carried out which explored the notion of the trip and connected the visible with memories and experienced feelings.

We began with a cyanotype, an analogue process that does not require the use of the camera, which enabled us to explain the meaning of photography. Different materials and textures were used to build up the landscape and thereby relate the visual qualities of a texture with the grading of opacity and transparency. In the following sessions, we worked with the digital camera. The purpose was to foster an interest in photography, to learn how to use the digital camera, and to take our first photographs using our bodies as primary references. We photographed objects that evoked and held significance regarding this trip. In another session, we worked with the pose as body language in photography. Other photographs were also

included, such as those from their travel photo album and those taken outside of the workshop.

In the last session, we developed the photographs in which had been assigned different textures and formats so that they could be identified. This allowed each participant to associate the imagined and photographed visual referent with a specific format and texture. Our aim was for each participant to independently relate all of the photographs and thereby form a set of images inspired by and connected with their trip. When putting the images in order, they were required to think about the connections between the photographs, which later they shared with the other participants. The narration turned into a reflection on their own images and the experience of photographing itself. The connections between images arose spontaneously and their words converted the seemingly unrelated photographs into a set of images that we could all imagine.

2.4. One further step: the visual connection between those who see and those who do not.



Having concluded the experience of the workshop, we decided that the narrative connections between the images should be shared beyond the scope of the ONCE. Therefore, we invited people from outside the project to give their interpretations about the visual connections of photographs, and also share their opinions with the creators. Consequently, alternative readings were presented and then attached to the images, which revealed the other sensations that the photographs had transmitted. This part of the project was participated by children and adults involved in teaching Fine Arts. Moreover, we also worked in collaboration with an artist who developed sound creations based on the images and original narrations of each participant.

During the months following the photography workshop, we have conducted individual sessions, not only to obtain an evaluation of the project, but also to share with the participants the other emotions and creations that their pictures have provoked in sighted people. These new readings have caused the blind participants to think that photography can be conceived beyond the visual, and also that the image becomes a visual message that connects both sighted and blind people.

Conclusions

Choosing photography as a visual language has been a challenge for everyone involved in this project. Firstly, it was a difficult task for the blind participants to confront the visual and to investigate the possibilities of photography, and the idea that they could access photographs through the process of artistic creation. Although the project involves photographic creations that afterwards the participants cannot see, the images remain as internal representations in their memory, due to having been imagined and the participants' sensory involvement

during the process. In this sense, a creative experience is a meaningful way of fostering communication from blindness through the visual.

We also want to point out the important aspects of a/r/tography present in the project.

- The collaboration was made possible thanks to each one of the participants involved in the process, both inside and outside of the workshop, who have been giving shape and meaning to the concept of photography from the perspective of blindness.
- A project should be understood as an open exercise in which new visual relationships and exchanges arise, which do not end on completion of the photography workshop. In fact, the workshop has served to continue exploring questions and looking for new ways to carry out research.
- The constant relationship between the visual and the textual in our experience. The textual communicates, generates thoughts, and provides a way of connecting blindness with photographs. Similarly, the visual is dependent on words in order to be communicated, therefore creating a dependency and relationship between the two languages.
- A methodology that generates reflection and learning spaces, in which these rhizomatic relationships are generated and fill the gaps in a research study.

Sullivan (2006) highlights that the concepts of education, community and culture are present in the figure of a/r/tographer, and his/her mission should be to perform imaginative and profound research (2006, p.21). Finding a way to conduct our research in this light, led us to propose that the researcher should have real practical and collaborative experience, in order to be able to reflect on processes and understand the relationships produced by that knowledge.

The identities of the educator, artist and researcher have caused us to continue considering new ways of connecting the idea of the photographic medium between sighted and blind people. A consideration that remains open.

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