

**The Self-Portrait Experience, a *dispositif* for individual
transformation and social activism**

The psychological and philosophical/political dynamics in Cristina Nuñez's practice

A Critical Appraisal by
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Preface

I hereby submit this Critical Appraisal for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Works to the College of Arts, Humanities and Education at the University of Derby. I have been supervised by Professor Huw Davies, Dr. Philip Harris and Dr. Clive Holmwood.

This Critical Appraisal with its appendices is my intellectual property and original work, except for the peer evaluation articles in appendix No.4, and other authors' citations, which have been appropriately referenced in the text, captions and in the bibliography at the end of the Critical Appraisal. The original work has never been published or submitted in any form elsewhere. Any re-use of any portion or section of this Critical Appraisal should be referenced citing the author, title, university and pagination.

Abstract

Cristina Nuñez's artistic practice using self-portraiture began in 1988 as she turned the camera to herself to overcome self-stigma derived from addiction. A process evolved of a self-taught artistic practice into facilitating other people's self-portraiture, leading her to devise The Self-Portrait Experience (SPEX). Since 2004 Nuñez holds SPEX workshops in diverse contexts, such as the penitentiary, mental health, addiction recovery and adolescent transition. A psychological framework allowed her to interrogate the effects of this practice on others and herself. However, Nuñez positions herself as a contemporary artist practitioner, not a therapist, who believes that the arts in themselves can be transformative. This research has culminated in the current investigation of the SPEX *dispositif*, a term used in contemporary France after Foucault and Agamben. In the workshops Nuñez holds around the world participants perform a 'catalytic' process by transforming emotional pain into what is referred to as artworks. Reviewing the multiple perceptions of the images produced allows participants to look at themselves through new lenses, as evidenced by data collected in her workshops over the years. SPEX uses the power of ubiquitous digital photography in a manner that subverts the common 'selfie' format, leveraging unconscious expression to explore emotions, in order to gain new insight and stimulate the creative process as reflexive. In this context, the SPEX *dispositif* defines as a set of measures taken for a specific artistic intervention. It involves plays of power, subverted in processes of subjectification, performativity and the deconstruction of dichotomies: ugly/beautiful, vulnerable/powerful, emotional/rational, unconscious/conscious, personal/public. Such processes can produce different kinds of knowledge: of oneself and one's inner struggles, of the other and our place in relational and societal plays of power. Through the publication of self-portraits and autobiographical projects, the personal and socio-political dimensions are connected. Nuñez's practice with herself and others proposes a dialogue between emotional expression and its mirroring effects on the public. The overarching goal is providing tangible societal benefits, in the form of viewer's identification with the subjects of the images, rather than dissociation and alienation. Through their publication, autobiographical visual narratives can function as an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 1980, p.82), to deconstruct labels and stereotypes often associated with stigmatised collectives. This critical evaluation catalogues the development of Nuñez's bodies of work over thirty years, interrogates its theoretical framework and reflects on the impact on participants and viewers.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors. Professor Huw Davies has given me valuable guidance throughout the whole process. Dr. Philip Harris has provided priceless critique on the theoretical framework of my research. The support of Dr. Clive Holmwood, Associate Professor, has been very helpful to examine the impact of my research in the analysis of data.

In addition to my supervisors, I have been very lucky to have the valuable support of my friend Kate Broom. Kate directed the first MA Art, Health and Well-being at Birmingham City University, and has an impressive experience in the field of the use of the arts in probation, mental health, education and social services. Our passionate discussions about my work have been inspiring for this research as well as her empathic support in moments of crisis.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Amanda Ravetz of the MMU, who initiated the *Wonderland* project and produced the film; to my friend Mark Prest, founding director of Portraits of Recovery, for involving me in the project; and to all *Wonderland* ‘recoverists’.

I am extremely grateful to all those who have invited me to hold SPEX workshops in the institutions they work for, and even more so to my workshop participants all over the world, who shared their humanity with me and produced impressive self-portraits.

I am grateful to the scholars, critics and professionals who have written very valuable articles about my work. Thank you Stefano Ferrari, Paul Di Felice, Anne Marie Ninaes, Carolina Lio and David Gauthier. Thank you, Dr. Drew Bird of the College of Health, and Dr. Matteo Vergani of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, for giving me helpful feedback on my narrative. Thank you, SPEX facilitators, for believing in my work, stimulating my enthusiasm to pursue my research.

And lastly, I would like to thank the professors and professionals who have written letters of evaluation of my work, allowing me to access this PhD by Published Works. Thank you, Paul di Felice, Laura Formenti, Stefano Ferrari, Del Loewenthal, Ulla Halkola, Amanda Ravetz, Rodolfo de Bernart and Tullia Toscani.

Introduction

My art practice is based on my life story as a quest for self-love and finding my place in the world. Painful experiences were related to heroin addiction in my teenage years and a life-long recovery from self-stigma. In 1988, after undergoing rehabilitation and psychotherapy, I started to photograph myself as a secret practice which stirred an internal creative process. Six years later I started taking portraits of others, creating books and exhibitions, alongside professional photography. I continued to photograph myself, and in times of crisis I observed it alleviated emotional pain and increased my self-esteem. In 1998 these effects compelled me to start investigating my artistic experience from a psychological perspective. In 2004, when my daughter Yassine took a series of self-portraits at three, I was struck by the thought that my practice could also be useful for others.



1. Yassine (2004), collaborative self-portrait. *Someone to Love*

I therefore devised a methodology around this process and shared it in self-portrait workshops in prisons, mental health centres, museums, galleries, universities and high schools around the world. My aim was, firstly, the artistic exploration of human emotions as a way to trigger the unconscious creative process and secondly, to capture new emotional expressions and experiences different from my own.

SPEX is both my autobiographical practice and the collaborative work with participants with a peer-to-peer approach. It consists of four steps: 1) taking of self-portraits and autobiographical images to explore one's inner life, 2) working on the multiple perceptions of the images using the SPEX criteria of perception, 3) creating personal projects and 4) disseminating them. My book *Higher Self – The Self-Portrait Experience* is an exhaustive explanation of SPEX: the method, the self-portrait exercises, the methodology of perception and the construction of autobiographical

projects.

My thirty-year practice can be divided in two parts: the first (1988-1998) concerns my use of the self-portrait, unaware of its causes and dynamics, to respond to unconscious needs; the psychological inquiry starts in the second part (1998-2019), when observing that this practice noticeably influenced my state of mind. The philosophical and political framework of the *dispositif*¹ emerged in 2018 to interact with the psychological perspective, leading me to formulate the following research questions:

1. How can the photographic self-portrait be used as an artistic *dispositif* for individual transformation and social activism?
2. How do the power dynamics work in this *dispositif* and how do they foster self-knowledge and empowerment by allowing subversion?
3. How can the self-portrait stimulate the unconscious creative process and provide critical outputs?
4. How does emotional expression in the self-portrait influence the multiple perceptions of the images and what are its effects on participants' self-image and wellbeing?
5. How does SPEX contribute to contemporary practices such as the *selfie*, self-portraiture in contemporary art and therapeutic uses of photography?

The aim of this Critical Appraisal is to give possible answers to these questions drawing from the experience and the results of the publications here presented, as outlined below.

¹ This is a key concept in this research, further discussed in section 1.4. The SPEX *dispositif*. It is used in French to recall Foucault's use and the way it is used in contemporary French culture.

CHAPTER 1. KEY MILESTONES

In this chapter I present a brief outline of the publications of my autobiographical practice and my work with others, which can be grouped in two main projects: *Someone to Love* and *Higher Self*, both of which inform and result from SPEX. The Appendix No.1 shows a complete and illustrated list of the publications presented in this Critical Appraisal. These projects were published between 2011 and 2017.

Secondly, I will discuss the research methodologies and examine my practice and the publications utilising the two theoretical frameworks: the psychological and the political/philosophical of the *dispositif*.

1.1. The publications



2. Nuñez, C. (1998), Blonde Cris, self-portrait. *Someone to Love*



3. Nuñez, C. (1999). Sick Cris. Self-portrait. *Someone to Love*

1.1.1. *Someone to Love*

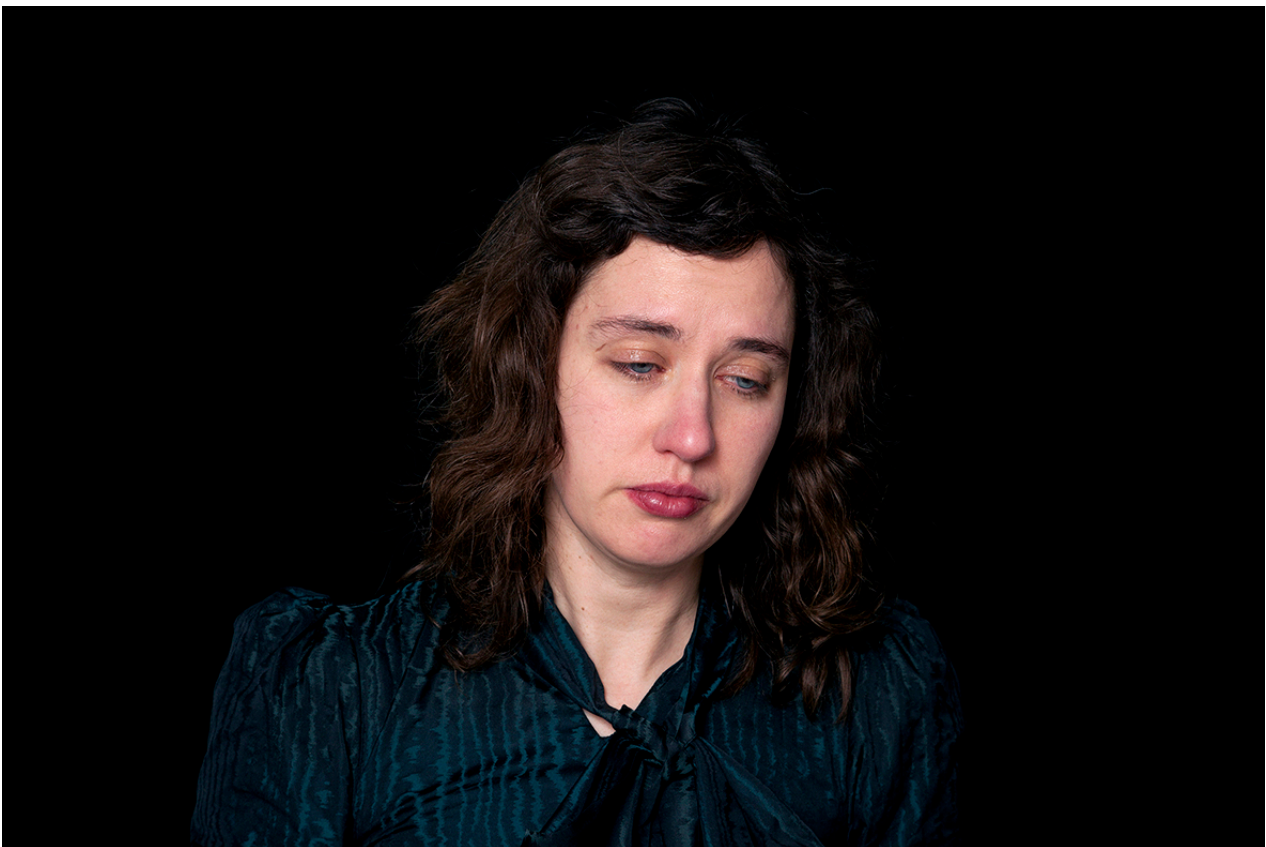
Someone to Love (2011) is my first autobiographical project (1962-2011) comprising a photo book (2010), a series of exhibitions (2011-2015) and a video - *diaporama*² (2011). A second book was published of the same project, with the title *But Beautiful* (2012), which named the subsequent

² In photography techniques, a diaporama is a photographic slide-show, often accompanied by sound, supposedly invented by French photographer and traveler Robert Thuillier in 1950 (Libération, 06/01/2005). A decade later, filmmaker and photographer Chris Marker used a similar technique known as photo novel in his films “La Jetée” (1962) and “Si j’avais quatre dromedaires” (1966).

exhibitions of the project. The project title suggests the never-ending search for loving and accepting myself, which has driven me throughout my whole practice.

The diaporama was commissioned in 2010 to accompany the exhibition in the 2011 Mois de la Photo in Montreal. My voice accompanies the viewer through my family history and childhood, a troubled adolescence as a heroin addict, the struggle to recover from its emotional effects, the evolution of self-image and the discovery of the self-portrait as a transformative tool. The *diaporama*'s last sequence shows my mother's life during her senile dementia until her last breath.

I consider the thirty years of self-portraits which gave shape to *Someone to Love* to be the foundation of my research, constantly feeding into an on-going reflexive process. This practice has set the grounds for the parallel work I do in collaboration with others and it allows me to achieve the empathic gaze towards them. At the same time, facilitating the same process in other people in the SPEX workshops informs my autobiographical practice, constantly stimulating me to find new artistic challenges and to expose my vulnerability further. The two practices, with others and myself, are thus intertwined and combined: SPEX workshop participants must see the two videos *Someone to Love* and *Higher Self* before enrolment, in order to understand the process.



4. Hertta (2010), collaborative self-portrait during a workshop at the Turku Academy of Arts, for the European Capital of Culture, Turku 2011. *Higher Self* series.

1.1.2. *Higher Self*

The collaborative self-portraits of the *Higher Self* series are produced during the workshops I hold using the SPEX *dispositif* in diverse contexts around the world. Alone in the portable photography studio I set up, and using a remote control, participants take a series of images on the expression of emotions such as anger, fear, despair or euphoria.

I decided to start the collaborative sessions in 2008, out of an interest to look closely at and artistically stimulate participants' transformation of emotions into images. Furthermore, I wanted to involve participants in my own creative process, thereby exploring participative creation. The use of a black backdrop, as explained in section 1.2.1, allowed me to decontextualize the participant and their emotional face from any other distractions, thus emphasizing emotional expression. This works as an antidote to the conventional photojournalistic approach, in which the context of war and famine allows us to put that pain at a distance, as if this always happens to someone else, far away from us. Instead, the decontextualization of emotional faces forces us to mirror ourselves in that image, as discussed in section 3.1. Social Activism. This has been the core idea of the *Higher Self* project.

French writer Michel Tournier affirmed that the self-portrait is the only possible image of the creator and their gaze, capturing the very moment of the creation of the image (Tournier 1986, p.35). Could the self-portrait artwork³ be thus considered a portrait of our creative self, which I refer to as our Higher Self?

Around three thousand and seven hundred collaborative self-portraits have been produced between 2008 and 2019. Among the images produced, around three hundred are part of the *Higher Self* project. This growing collection displays a myriad of possible emotional combinations and expressions of the human face. *Higher Self* has been published in my book *Higher Self, The Self-Portrait Experience* (Le Caillou Bleu, 2012) and in exhibitions, as part of the following projects with vulnerable collectives.

³ “A work of art is an image that contains multiple meanings, often contrasting: it deals intimately with the human condition, it contains a rich diversity of stimuli to thought and feeling, and it possesses a special relationship with time, all within a harmonious configuration of aesthetic and formal elements.” (Nuñez, 2009) The SPEX criteria of perception are used for the choice of the artworks and to work on the multiple perceptions they stimulate. See the SPEX criteria in the book *Higher Self*, page 95.



5. Stigma (2016). *Higher Self* series. Collaborative group self-portrait during a workshop at Bredtveit prison, Oslo. The scene was conceived by R. (right) who asked the group of photographers assisting me during the workshop, and myself, to point our fingers to her.



6. Mark and Jayne (2016), *Higher Self* series, *Wonderland, the Art of Becoming Human*. Relationship collaborative self-portrait.

Wonderland, the art of becoming human is a project initiated by Professor Amanda Ravetz, visual anthropologist and researcher of the Manchester School of Art with Mark Prest, founding director of Portraits of Recovery. The project involved a group of addicts in recovery from drugs or alcohol who participated in a six-day self-portrait workshop led by myself in 2016 in Manchester and produced the *Higher Self* collaborative self-portraits with me in the studio. By the end of the workshop participants produced autobiographical artist books, which are published on the project website. Ravetz produced and authored a film documenting participants' experience during my workshop, which received the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) "Research As Film Utopia Award". Ravetz co-authored two papers and produced a website through participants' feedback interviews on podcasts. Although these publications are not authored by myself, they are presented as independent documentary evidence of the *Higher Self* series, the SPEX workshop and its impact on participants in recovery.



7. Monica (2011). *Higher Self* series. Collaborative self-portrait in Brians 1 prison, Barcelona.

Since 2009 I have been holding SPEX workshops with over three hundred prison inmates, men and women, in Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Norway. During these workshops, an important number of *Higher Self* images have been produced. *We Exist* is an online exhibit of a project produced in

Norway with the support of the EEA Grants. Other projects in prison have been published in this form and as part of documentary videos. These experiences have led me to start collaborations in the field of criminology.⁴ During the SPEX workshops in prisons, one hundred and forty eight inmates responded to a feedback form, and the resulting data analysed in Appendix No.2. supports that the workshop allowed them to see themselves in different ways.

1.2. Research methodologies

My aim in this section is to outline the different methodologies used in my practice over the years in this research, and giving the rationale for a movement from the intuitive to more conscious thinking. I have considered using methodologies such as auto-ethnography and heuristics, since my own autobiography is one of the main subjects of this research. However, I decided to focus on interrogating my work with others and analyse the data deriving from it from the perspective of two main research methodologies: the psychological and the philosophical/political.

This research has allowed me to use the different methodologies in a more structured way, as discussed in the following sections.

1.2.1. Quantitative and qualitative research

Since 2009 my collaborations with academics on research projects have led me to gather evidence in my workshops, in order to investigate the transformative effects on participants. I have used questionnaires, open-ended feedback, interviews and case studies. In Appendix No.2. Impact, I have analysed most of the data collected over the years through the questionnaires, case studies, free feedback forms and interviews, as forms of quantitative and qualitative research. Throughout this Critical Appraisal I will refer to this data and the related discoveries.

I have analysed two different sets of data:

⁴ I have held a lecture at the Master of Criminology of the University in Lausanne, and I have been involved in a project about desistance in Switzerland.

1. The recent questionnaires, filled in by workshop participants of the general public: one hundred and eighty-one respondents from July 2018 to March 2019. The questionnaires were constructed using statements of previous open-ended feedback (2007-2017).
2. Data gathered in prisons from 2011 to 2015, from one hundred and forty-eight inmates who participated in my workshops. This data consists of questionnaires with open-ended responses and unstructured feedback without questions.

Since three hundred and twenty-nine respondents represent a low proportion of the overall number of participants, the results may not be statistically significant. However, the data identifies impacts and trends which support some of the theoretical proposals in the following sections.

I have analysed the two different sets of data with two different methodologies. Firstly, I have utilised a psychological framework for the 2018 questionnaires. Secondly, the prison data was examined using both the psychological and the philosophical/political frameworks.

1.2.2. Early learning and its impact on facilitating methodology

I assisted in my then partner's photography studio for twelve years, unaware of being an apprentice. In Renaissance Italy this kind of learning was called *a bottega*, literally 'in the workshop'. I was unknowingly trained to the concept of *aesthetics* and *aesthetic sensibility* as Bateson understands it, as "the pattern which connects" (Bateson 1979, p.8). The psychotherapist Giovanni Madonna, who employs Bateson's epistemological models, discusses the concept of

...knowledge achieved through sensibility... human beings have constant recourse to the "art" of knowing the world and acting in it on the basis of their own sensibility. (Madonna 2007, p.934, author's translation)

As a facilitator I have created a similar relationship with participants: a peer-to-peer approach starting with the disclosure of my autobiography and my use of SPEX. Unqualified or subjugated knowledges such as my own, that carry with them no formal training or scientific endorsement, can only propose what has worked for them and their adherents. A claim made by subjugated knowledges that carry no scientific validation, is that it cannot be asked of others to do something that hasn't been tested on oneself first.

1.2.3. The psychological framework to examine an artistic practice

Stimulated by my long-term recovery I intuitively used the self-portrait since 1988. When I became conscious that this practice increased my self-esteem, I started to investigate the dynamics of the self-portrait as a tool for self-transformation.⁵ After 2004, I started to investigate the effects on workshop participants' wellbeing, by gathering their feedback through questionnaires, open-ended statements and video interviews.

Due to the growing interest on 'therapeutic photography', as defined by Judy Weiser,⁶ I was invited to participate in conferences and hold workshops in university departments of art-therapy, drama-therapy, psychology of art and psychotherapy⁷. Approximately half of my workshop participants are professionals from the therapeutic field, the other half being artists, photographers or photography lovers who are interested in its transformative power. In 2011 the Department of Clinical Psychology of the Catholic University in Milan conducted research on my workshop for teenagers as part of the project *Sono Io!* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography⁸. Their results, based on students' responses to questionnaires, showed that the majority of participants had changed their perception of themselves after the workshop (Brivio 2011, p.142). This discovery has been further supported by other research projects and by the data gathered in the questionnaires completed in 2018/2019 by my workshop participants, in Appendix No.2.

These steps towards my recognition as an artist working in the field of psychology and therapeutic practices, and my interaction within the field fuelled my own research from this perspective. This investigation was based on the following concepts, which support the transformative power of the creative process:

- The catalytic process of transforming emotions into photographs
- The unconscious creative process as a source of self-knowledge
- The encounter of the 'other' in the self-portrait and the broadening of perception of oneself and others
- The mirroring and identification in others' images

⁵ See my paper 'The Self-portrait as self-therapy', p.58, in my book *Higher Self – The Self-portrait Experience* and on the academic publications.

⁶ See section 2.4. Phototherapy and therapeutic photography.

⁷ Universities such as Roehampton, Northampton, New York, Bologna, Barcelona, Milan, Naples, Turku, Girona and others.

⁸ This research is included in a graduate thesis by Valentina Brivio.

The psychological was my main form of inquiry before pursuing this PhD by Published Works. Until recently, I only attempted to validate the effects on participants' self-awareness and self-esteem. But in 2018 the philosophical methodology of the *dispositif* emerged, allowing me to observe my work from a different perspective and understand its socio-political implications. However, the two approaches interweave and complement each other, as discussed at the end of section 1.4. In section 1.3, I will discuss my practice utilising the psychological framework.

1.2.4. The philosophical and political framework: the *dispositif*

I refer to SPEX as a *dispositif* as signified in French thinking: a set of measures taken for a specific intervention. French critics and curators have often referred to SPEX as an artistic *dispositif*, but it wasn't until I read Foucault in 2018 that I understood how this term could provide a new perspective. The *dispositif* has become a wrap-around framework and a reflexive process, a methodological approach, allowing me to address the complexity of dynamics of power and knowledge inherent to my practice. Reflecting on these has helped me address ethical issues and informed my present and future practice and research.

An apparatus or *dispositif* for Foucault is a dynamic network of heterogeneous elements, mechanisms and practices, related to one another, and functioning strategically to respond to an urgency. The apparatus produces more or less immediate effects on human beings and social situations by means of 'plays of power' which will eventually produce knowledge (Foucault 1980, p.194-96). Although Foucault used the term *dispositif* to refer to what he called "the government of men", Giorgio Agamben states that the *dispositif* can be "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben 2009, p. 14). In section 1.4. I will discuss these definitions and explore how and why SPEX is a *dispositif*, involving processes of subjectification/desubjectification, performativity and plays of power, producing knowledge.

1.3. The expression of emotions and the unconscious creative process

In this next section I will apply the psychological framework to discuss workshop participants' and my own autobiographical practices. I will examine the following aspects: the catalytic process of emotional expression; the unconscious creative process as a source of self-awareness; the encounter

with the ‘other’ in our self-portrait and the broadening of self-perception; and lastly the processes of mirroring and identification in others’ images.

1.3.1. The expression of emotions: *Someone to Love*

Most of the self-portraits I took since 1988 were taken in moments of emotional pain about feeling ‘wrong’, a self-stigmatisation I suffered from since my childhood, and during life-long recovery from addiction and low self-esteem. According to Matthews et al. (2017, p.278) self-stigmatised individuals exclude themselves from public life, and I felt this as a strong tendency which made relationships very difficult. Heroin had relieved emotional pain, so I needed other ways to obtain the same effect and, at the same time, learn to accept myself and discover my potential before I could relate to others. The non-judgmental setting of psychotherapy provided the discovery and the pleasure of transparent self-disclosure. This stimulated a strong-willed agency I didn’t consider myself capable of, since addiction involves a “failure of normal rational effective agency” (Flanagan 2013, p.1). The artistic intentionality to represent myself in pictures took me further, through the performative exposure of the physical body and face, which I could rediscover in a myriad of possible expressions, and recreate an uncompromising gaze upon myself.

Emotions were transformed into images through a dialogue with the camera’s eye, by first performing them, while listening to what I felt in that moment, in order to contact with the authentic emotion.⁹ Later included in SPEX, this procedure emerged intuitively, since I really wanted to capture those feelings in the picture and setting up the camera seemed to immediately dissipate the emotion. Could this be due to what I refer to as the Creative Self, the intentional performative self that, being immersed in the act of creation, does not let itself be carried away by feelings?

This transformation allowed me to formulate the hypotheses that emotional pain needs expression and that it can stimulate a cathartic creative process, producing what I considered as aesthetically powerful images. The process provided immediate wellbeing, even before looking at the photographs.

After this cathartic transformation of pain into a creative output, another significant process happened: looking at some of the self-portraits I realised that there was a non-judgmental

⁹ See section 1.4. The SPEX *dispositif*.

encounter with that ‘other in me’. This provided an intriguing process of an ever-changing perception: from the non-recognition of that ‘otherness’ to the recognition and acceptance of my own emotions, needs, thoughts and values, as in Lacan’s *mirror stage* (1966-2006). I was somehow taking possession of that ‘other in me’ by adding to the richness of identity and self-image, and reversing the self-stigmatising process.

The perceptive process fostered self-knowledge through the discovery of my multiple identities, suggesting the transformative impact of the *dispositif*, as Anne-Marie Ninacs, curator of the Mois de la Photo in Montreal 2011, puts it:

Her resilience, openness and empowerment derived from her complete acceptance of what she saw in the photographs (Ninacs 2011, p.268)

The urgent need to share this process with the public also emerged from the need to establish more profound and meaningful relationships and to rebel against the widespread but underlying message that emotions other than happiness should be kept within instead of shared and that we should show that we are happy in order to be accepted and successful. The publication of my autobiographical diaporama functions as a revelation of my shortcomings, something that stigmatised individuals tend to conceal (Goffman 1962), as a further subversion to stigmatisation and self-stigmatisation.¹⁰ The possible societal benefits of this dissemination became clearer: other people mirrored themselves in my work, were eager to tell their own stories and wanted to participate in the workshops. Stefano Ferrari, Professor of Psychology of Art at the University of Bologna, writes about the mirroring process in SPEX in the preface of my book *Higher Self*:

The virtuous circle created by this act of self-affirmation depends precisely on the self-portrait’s ability to involve the other, who in turn feels compelled to look inside himself with the same intensity. In this sense every self-portrait is also our own self-portrait, and its practice encourages understanding and closer relationships between people. (Ferrari 2012, p.14)

This mirroring process of self-recognition in the ‘other’ is a critical element of my work and made me feel as a social activist - a role consciously assumed in the subsequent projects. The disclosure of my life story is crucial to the egalitarian peer-to-peer relationship established with workshop

¹⁰ See my TEDx talk in the attached pen-drive.

participants. Curator, critic and Professor of the University of Luxemburg Paul di Felice describes my approach towards workshop participants:

Whether in schools, prisons, hospitals, companies or art centres, each workshop starts with a subtly introduced deconstruction by the artist who strips bare her own feelings and experiences by illustrating her ideas through artistic representations that remove all barriers between life and art. (Di Felice 2012, p.5)

Life and art become intimately connected: the experiential and the performative aspects working together, as discussed in section 1.4. Autobiographical narrative with text, photographs and videos, published in several forms, is central to this research and what stimulates people to participate in SPEX workshops, where they are encouraged to produce their own projects. The autobiographical diaporama *Someone to Love* re-constructs emotional memory through images that can awaken memories and emotions in viewers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds.

The diaporama starts with the description of what I felt as my shameful cultural roots: a family of high-rank Navy officers closely related to Franco, the Spanish dictator, even collaborating with the Nazis during WWII. Rejection of these cultural roots brought me to travel, looking for more egalitarian societies and a multiplicity of ways of understanding and being. I've held workshops in English, French, Italian and Spanish in the following countries: Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland, Germany, UK, Luxemburg, Finland, Norway, Canada, USA, Australia, South Korea and Bangladesh. Working with others strengthened the cross-cultural inquiry, responding to my will to connect with people through their feelings, and to see that, despite the differences, the disclosure of my own story could be felt by many. Like auto-ethnographers I have made my work available by publishing it online¹¹, aiming at "making personal and social change possible for more people" (Ellis 2011, p.2). The practice was thus becoming a "political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis 2011, p.1). I observed that the expression of emotions and the way people reacted when looking at the images did not significantly change according to their culture, race or social status, showing more similarities than differences. In SPEX workshops, both a prison inmate and an executive manager find it hard to accept emotional images of themselves and are surprised to discover a complete change in their perception of themselves. In a SPEX workshop in Seoul, most participants wept during the process and asserted, "We cannot express our emotions out there". People from different cultures have different ideas and values about the expression of emotions.

¹¹ All my videos including the diaporama *Someone to Love* (in English) are visible online on my website cristinanunez.com and my Youtube and Vimeo channels with subtitles in Italian, French and Spanish.

However, the expression of pain in Korean and Bangladeshi participants looked very familiar to me, as a common language, as if there were no cultural differences between them and myself, despite, in some cases, we couldn't communicate with words. Thus, SPEX is a cross-cultural dispositive which proposes a common language based on emotional expression. Culture and art can be used as the foundations for political change.

My upbringing generated a high sensitivity towards power relations, also due to my vulnerable position in the relationship with my sisters, parents and peers. The resulting emotional pain compelled me to subvert to behavioural, cultural and territorial forms of power, through drug addiction and prostitution, emigrating from Spain, learning three more languages, refusing to speak Spanish to my daughters and positioning myself as an artist. Giving artistic value to emotional expression and vulnerability was, and is firstly a claim for self-worth, and at the same time, a more mature defiance than addiction towards societal power roles, as discussed in section 1.4.

1.3.2. The unconscious creative process

A first hypothesis emerged from the SPEX workshops with others: that the photographic self-portrait could trigger a partly *unconscious* creative process. This is because participants are authors who become subjects of their work. But they cannot see themselves while they take the pictures. During the collaborative sessions, most participants assert that they were not fully aware of the moment when the 'artwork' was produced. They were partly immersed in introspection and at the same time intentionally doing what needs to be done in order to produce the photograph. This introspection is also facilitated by the ten-second timer, which allows them to prepare themselves to access the emotional state¹². Most respondents to the questionnaires state that they didn't know what they had done in the studio. This state is achieved through the simultaneous control and lack of control, the vulnerability of emotional experience and the empowering performativity, the plays of power. These dynamics are further discussed in section 1.4.

As French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman states,

¹² In my instructions I tell participants that I have set up the ten-second timer, and advise them to put down the remote control after activating it, so that it will not appear in the picture and their hands will be free.

when the emotion flows through us, our soul moves, trembles, agitates, and our body does all kinds of things we don't even know about (Didi-Huberman 2013, p.32, author's translation).

And emotions, as performative utterances within the individual and towards others, possess a transformative and creative force:

... being *motions*, movements, commotions, they are as well *transformations* of those who are moved. (Didi-Huberman 2013, p.49, author's translation)

In most series of pictures taken by participants, like these below, we can often witness the evolution of the emotion, shot after shot.



8. N. (2015). *Higher Self* series. Collaborative self-portrait on the expression of emotions. Quatre Camins prison, Barcelona.

Roland Barthes evidences the subject's unawareness about what the photographic process can reveal:

...for the photographic "shock"(quite different from the *punctum*) consists less in traumatising than in revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it. (Barthes 1980, p.32)

This can be applied to the self-portraitist, being in front of the camera, possibly photographing something unknown or hidden of the self. Being in front of the camera lens and concentrating on one's feelings can easily provoke uncontrolled emotional expression and what Barthes calls

the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity (Barthes 1980, p.12).

But Barthes was being photographed, and therefore more vulnerable than the author, subject and spectator of a self-portrait.

The emotional expression certainly enhances the decisiveness of being in front of the camera, which could be partly explained by what Walter Benjamin attributes to the camera itself: the power to access the unconscious.

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. (...) The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin 1935, p.16)

Freud himself, in a letter to photographer Edmund Engelson months before his death in 1939, acknowledges the ability of photography to access the unconscious, and the *unheimlich*¹³:

Probably the value of photography lies in that it shows what our eyes can never see, allowing us to penetrate beyond the surface before which our vision usually stops. I wouldn't be surprised if, in a near future, someone would happen to talk about an "optical unconscious" that only the camera can reveal.

One of the ways the *unheimlich* is manifested (...) regards our own image, when we do not recognise ourselves in it; and the photographic portrait is a perfect example of this. (as cited in Vitale 2018, p.14-15, author's translation)

In SPEX the choice of the self-portraits is critical, and too often images subjectively referred to as artworks are felt as *unheimlich*. I believe the unconscious speaks with the language of art, expressing what needs to be said, or what we need to know today, with what we consider beautiful or impactful aesthetic elements which attract our attention. According to this idea, the unconscious creative process produces 'artworks' with surprising aesthetical elements that nobody consciously controlled: composition, light, expression, geometries, colour, etc.¹⁴ We are therefore interested in what the most aesthetically powerful image might express, or better, in the multiple perceptions we can see in it.

¹³ The uncanny: for Freud, the *unheimlich* or uncanny locates the strangeness in the ordinary. *Heim* is home in German, *Heimlich* is homely, *unheimlich* is what makes us feel estranged.

¹⁴ See the book *Higher Self – The Self-Portrait Experience*, page 98.

Participants are often reminded that perception is partly subjective, that we never diagnose the subject or interpret the images, and that we explore all their possible utterances as stimuli for self-thought. As discussed in section 1.4, a multiplicity of emotions and attitudes – often opposite - is contained in only one image, and this can symbolise the reunion of different and often opposite aspects of the self. The images we consider artworks seem to express both the emotional and the performative aspects: the vulnerable and the powerful, in the same person, due to the plays of power during the production of the images. Daniela, a participant suggests this trend:

Right and left (sides of the face) invite us to see multiple sides of the same coin, to realise that I am both sides at the same time.¹⁵

The process of perception of the images can enable participants to start recognising their own emotions, needs and values in images in which they did not recognise themselves, as emerges from the feedback questionnaires. I always talk about the subject of the image as ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘they’, as if they were someone else, which helps participants to detach and perceive it better, as suggested by the data. It is precisely the encounter with the ‘other’ who inhabits our own image and the re-introjection of this ‘other’ by recognising personal aspects, which can provoke a broadening of self-perception and the discovery of potential. The first disturbing encounter with the ‘other’ and the subsequent process of recognition constitutes a replication of what Lacan calls the *mirror stage*:

It suffices to understand the *mirror stage* as an identification (...): the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase... (Lacan 1966-2006, p.76)

This identification functions as a ‘symbolic matrix’ for the construction of identity, the “rootstock of secondary identifications” (Lacan 1966-2006, p.76).

As emerging from the 2018 questionnaires and the prison data, most participants don’t like or recognise themselves in the SPEX collaborative self-portraits, especially those I refer to as artworks. An image that comes from the unconscious is not supposed to be pleasing or coherent with the image we have of ourselves. Bombarded as we are with images of ideal beauty which

¹⁵ Daniela participated to a workshop by SPEX facilitator Lucia Alessandrini, who was trained by myself in 2017. I have trained thirty SPEX facilitators. Seven of them use SPEX regularly. Future developments of this research will focus on this training and the impact achieved by them. In the prison data analysis there is an example of an ex-inmate who has become a SPEX facilitator, page 30.

respond to the needs of the fashion and cosmetic industry and used to construct images – *selfies* – which show ‘our best’, we all want to ‘look good’ in a photograph. The fact that adolescents and youth constantly delete ‘ugly’ selfies, rejecting these opportunities to enrich and empower their self-image, suggests that we might be going through a global crisis of identity. As Lacan asserts, the process of recognition of oneself in an ‘uncomfortable’ image is crucial for the construction or reconstruction of identity. How are teens going to construct their adult identity if they keep on rejecting the challenge of looking at authentic images of themselves? SPEX addresses the problem by proposing a work on the multiple perceptions of these ‘ugly pictures’ that can broaden our perception of ourselves. Recognising our own emotions, thoughts and life experiences, and working on epical storytelling, we learn to see the value of such image and we actually re-introject it, that is, we take possession of the ‘other’ appearing in the picture, allowing us to (re)construct or re-programme our identity, drawing from Lacan’s mirror stage. These processes also allow us to split the dichotomy between ‘ugly’ and ‘beautiful’ stereotypes by exploring the space in between. As emerged from the feedback questionnaires, a number of respondents replied, when asked about the effects of the workshop: “Working on the perception of those ugly images of myself has allowed me to accept them, and learn to love myself more.”

The use of the SPEX *dispositif* in prison is particularly effective in providing new ways of perceiving oneself, which concurs with recent studies on desistance from crime. There has been a paradigm shift in justice intervention research (McNeill 2012, p.41), focusing on the individual as an asset, as opposed to the offence/punishment model. It recommends “developing programmes that don’t aim to change offenders but rather aim simply to help them explore – to look at their lives through some new lenses” (Porporino 2010, p.78). Prison inmates’ feedback supports the idea that SPEX allows participants to see themselves and others in a different way. I recently held a workshop at La Stampa penitentiary in Lugano, Switzerland. In their feedback, the educational staff asserted that the broadening of perception of self and others was useful to contrast the rigidity of judgement and prejudice, which often stimulates violent thoughts and actions.

But what are the philosophical and political dynamics that allow emotional expression to facilitate the unconscious creative process and produce creative outputs? What power relations are involved in the process and how do these provide empowerment and knowledge? The next section will address these issues by means of the philosophical and political perspective of the *dispositif*.

1.4. The SPEX *dispositif*

1.4.1. What is SPEX?

SPEX is an artistic *dispositif* which can work without my presence. Workshops and the book *Higher Self* are aimed at the transmission of the following process so participants can practice it autonomously:

1. The production of photographic self-portraits and autobiographical images, inspired by diverse self-portrait ‘exercises’ divided in three parts: Me, Me and the Other, and Me and the World, for the exploration of different aspects of our lives. Self-portraits can be produced collaboratively with me or other facilitators in SPEX workshops, and by participants on their own.
2. A structured work on the multiple perceptions of the images, both individually and in the group, using the method’s artistic and humanistic criteria.¹⁶
3. The construction of autobiographical art projects by means of the dialogue between images, the construction of sequences and the usage of other mediums, such as video, sound, writing, maps, drawings, objects, etc.
4. And finally, their exposure to the public in a creative output, which can happen individually or collectively.

The collaborative self-portrait sessions, held both in individual and group workshops, consist in the following procedure. In the SPEX group workshops, where I hold a number of individual sessions in one day, I use a portable photo studio with a black backdrop, which conceals all shadows so I only need two strobe lights. I invite participants into the studio one by one to take self-portraits, with the remote control and the ten-seconds timer, while trying to express one chosen emotion. Having given the following instructions, I leave the participant alone to take pictures:

Choose one of the following emotions: anger, fear, despair or euphoria¹⁷. Start acting or performing the emotion while you listen to your real emotions in the moment, to check whether and when the performed emotion becomes real. While you act, explore the expressive possibilities of your face, not only your usual expressions. When you start feeling the emotion, perform a silent scream to let

¹⁶ In the following pages I will partly describe the exploration of the multiple perceptions of the self-portraits. A full description of the SPEX criteria can be found in my book *Higher Self*.

¹⁷ See the discussion about my choice of these emotions in section 3.1.1.

it all out. Then, stop acting and listen to your actual emotions, thoughts and physical sensations. Take five pictures of all steps of this process.

When they have finished, I come in and accompany them in the process of perception of the images, involving them in the choice of the final work. The next day they will share their images with the group, if there is one. Further workshops encourage participants to use the *dispositif* on their own, with their own equipment and aesthetic choices, with the aim of exploring their lives with the medium and building an autobiographical project, in the form of a book, a video, an exhibition or installation. The training for facilitators enables them to transmit the *dispositif* to others.

The SPEX methodology of perception consists of a series of artistic and humanistic criteria: multiplicity (exploring the many different and often opposite messages, expressions, emotions of the subject); temporality (perceiving the temporalities in which the subject is concentrated); visual harmony (composition, colour, geometries, visual elements) and *Higher Self* (iconic/epic quality, archetypes, symbols, dreams and storytelling). The multiplicity criterion is central to the perceptive work in SPEX. It mainly consists of looking at the two sides of the face separately in the chosen photograph(s), as described in the following pages. Each side of the face corresponds to the opposite brain hemisphere, according to theories of emotional lateralisation (Lindell 2013; Rinn 1984; Patten 1996; Matsumoto and Lee 1993), and in most SPEX collaborative self-portraits the difference is surprising for most participants, as emerges from the analysis of the prison data. In 2007, while studying the human face in images by workshop participants, I was surprised to observe that in the images we considered as potential artworks, the two sides expressed completely different emotions and attitudes, and we have continued to perceive these differences since then. Future developments of this research will examine the existing neurological theories on emotional lateralisation, which seem to match the following empirical but subjective perceptions.

In 2011 Canadian gallerist Bettina Forget provided one of the significant images that we work on in my group workshops to train participants on the in-depth perception of the human face.



9. Bettina (2011), collaborative self-portrait. Mois de la Photo Montreal 2011. *Higher Self* series.

Here are the different emotions and attitudes people usually perceive in this image:



According to the perceptive work done in SPEX workshops since 2007, I refer to the left side of the face as ‘the emotional side’. I have observed that, when working on this particular image in my workshops since 2011, participants tend to perceive, first of all, emotional pain and resignation. After a while, someone usually sees anger, a possible reaction to the pain. I then ask the group what thoughts do they see she might have and some have said, “I won’t tolerate this anymore” or seen decisions such as “I’m leaving now”. In an image taken in a hundredth of a second, viewers can perceive different layers of expression: the pain, the anger as a reaction to the pain, and a decision triggered by those emotions.



Then we look at the right side of the face and I ask the group “what is the difference?” People are often very surprised to discover completely opposite things on this side: strength, knowledge, vision of the future, the feeling that she will succeed, even satisfaction for what she has achieved. Following the perceptive trends emerging from my group workshops, I usually refer to the right side of the face as the side of the mind and pro-activity, the side of wisdom, of the goals and the strategy to achieve those goals.

The dynamics and goals of this perceptive process are discussed in section 1.3.2. The unconscious creative process.

1.4.2. Why is SPEX a *dispositif*?

SPEX collaborative self-portrait sessions use the camera and the photographic studio in a different way, by subverting the power dynamics these apparatuses traditionally involve. To understand how this is pursued, I shall now examine the SPEX *dispositif* as a ‘network’ (Foucault 1977) composed of and linking processes of subjectification and performativity as a form of resistance to power and production of knowledge.

The SPEX *dispositif* involves subjectification, the process of becoming a subject¹⁸. For Foucault, the subject is an individual in the societal context. In SPEX, the camera eye represents society, looking at the individual, and the camera is the main tool of the creative process. Participants are

¹⁸ I use the term *subject* to signify the person who appears in the image. Participants are not only subjects, but authors (if they take the self-portraits with their own cameras), co-authors (in the collaborative self-portrait sessions) and spectators of the images.

subjects of the image but also authors, or co-authors in the collaborative sessions in my studio, and spectators, as discussed below. The *dispositif* must produce its subject (Agamben 2009, p.11), and this happens repeatedly and intentionally during the performative lapse of time that leads participants to trigger the camera shutter and take their self-portrait: “the sorts of artistic performances and aesthetic experiences that this process involves” (Shusterman 2012, p.67). This performative process is visible in the film *Wonderland, the art of becoming human*, in which participants were filmed while they were alone in the studio, taking the pictures. We can witness them thinking and listening to their inner worlds, aware of their bodies and faces while trying to find possible expressions, and finally being ‘captured’ by the camera and transformed into an image.

As Judith Butler opines, performing subjects have agency, since “the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency”, and the possibility of resistance to power: “a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked and resisted” (Butler 1995a, p.46). The SPEX *dispositif* proposes a series of actions to stimulate participants’ responses, because they are the ‘protagonists’ who will bring their inner worlds and all possible reactions to every single action of the process. The participant is given the remote control and the power to shoot the picture, immediately confirming their performative agency: “There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler 1999, p.199). Thus the performing subject has the power to resist and oppose, because its performative elements and tools allow them to break free of the subject position (Butler 1997, p.14).

Another way of exploring the idea of the subject and its possibilities of recalcitrance, drawing from Foucault and Agamben, is the notion of subjectivity which does not design a fixed idea of identity, but something the subject does, allowing identity to develop. Agamben (2006) conceives subjectivity as a dialectical process of subjectification and desubjectification. The latter is seen as a process of breaking free from subject positions, and this happens again and again in SPEX. For instance, when the participant is alone, in front of the camera, before taking a self-portrait, it would seem that they will soon become a subject when activating the remote control. However, emotions, thoughts and desires, that is, their alive and free inner worlds, can motivate them to break free of the subject position. The same can occur in other steps of the process, while looking at the images and going from the non-recognition of themselves in those images or expressions, to the recognition and acceptance of their own emotions and life experiences.

The interaction between the performative and the experiential aspects is central to SPEX and can further clarify these processes. Being generally difficult to express an authentic emotion on command, participants are advised to perform the emotion while focusing on their actual emotions, in order to really experience it. I tell them not to worry if the acting feels false, because being in front of the camera is both a performance and an experience, and emotions can be perceived as true in the resulting images, even if they didn't *feel* real. However, a performed emotion can become real, that is, be *felt*, despite the fact that I don't ask them to draw upon emotional memories through a mental act. Rather, I ask them to focus on the physical expressions and the real emotions they feel while doing this. Images I refer to as artworks according to the SPEX criteria seem to express a balanced blend of the experiential and the performative aspects: the authentic life in the subject due to emotional experience, and the performative intention to communicate this to an audience represented by the camera eye. Life and art: the two parts together form the reality of the situation.

Emotional expression can enhance the performative and potentially subversive elements in the participant and in the subject of the photographs. This happens both during the production of images and in the perceptive process, both within the workshop and during its exposure to the public. While Shusterman explores performativity of the subject while the image is taken, Laura Levin addresses the performative encounter between the photograph and the viewer, analysing “the affective appeals that photographs make to their viewers” (Levin 2009, p.328). Levin here refers to spectators in the public, but I am also interrogating affect in participants who are looking at their self-portraits. Given the difficulty of observing and accepting such an image of oneself, one could thus claim that the images' utterances can affect them to a higher degree, even more eloquently so because of emotional expression.

In the SPEX collaborative sessions participants are co-authors, the ones who transform themselves into subjects, in order to be able to be spectators and see themselves. According to Anthony Bond, curator of the 2005 National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Self-Portrait, Renaissance to Contemporary*, the self-portraitist acquires a triple role through their gaze, symbol of their creative power: they are, at the same time, author, subject and spectator of the self (Bond 2005, p.12). But Bond was referring to painting, not to photography, where the triple role happens in a fraction of a second¹⁹. My claim is that the three roles are present in that instant: the author intentionally activates the remote control; the subject performs and feels the experience; the spectator, despite not being able to see themselves as in a mirror, is concentrated in their emotions, body and face, but also in the whole process. Thus, subjectification in SPEX happens as a revision of the relationships

¹⁹ My camera settings are usually F14 – 1/100 - iso 100.

between author, subject and spectator in an experience which is unified and self-contained in one image. As a facilitator I present myself as a subject too, by means of autobiographical self-disclosure, as well as author and spectator. The triple role is often shifted and shared, as well as the 'plays of power' (Foucault 1977) involved in the process, both within each participant and in relationship with others.

Before deciding to join the workshop participants usually go through internal 'plays of power', because photographing one's difficult emotions, looking at those *unheimlich* images of themselves and listening to others' perceptions, can be self-challenging. Then, being alone in front of an imposing professional camera, in a photo studio with a black fabric backdrop and big strobe lights, with the remote control in hand, participants choose to put themselves in a vulnerable and at the same time a power enabling state, a play of power. I set up the studio, as photographers do traditionally, and give the instructions for the expression of emotions, but I underline that, being co-authors, they can follow them or not, while listening to what they need to do. After that and unlike most photographers, I leave the studio and I will be absent while the pictures are taken. In this lapse of time of three to five minutes, the participant borrows a sense of authority, being the only one who decides what to express and how to do it, as in the scene of the film *Wonderland* discussed above. However, the participant does not exactly decide the instant in which the picture will be taken, due to the ten-second timer, although the red light will flash quickly when it is about to trigger the shutter. The timer extends and intensifies the performative moment and the play of power between the camera and the participant. Usually photographers show their sitters only their selection of images, but in SPEX we look at all the images immediately, and I involve participants in the perception and choice, proposing and justifying my choice of what I refer to as the artwork, with the help of the method's criteria. Participants are encouraged to respond, by making their own choices and express what they see in the images. In the film *Wonderland*, Jayne Gosnall asserts "we were given the chance to rebel"(Gosnall, 2016). Thus, shifting plays of power can be transformed into dialogue to achieve common goals.

During the group work they decide whether to show them to the group or not and they reply to the group's perceptions. Epical and archetypal storytelling is based on chosen images to make sense of emotional expressions which strike as indefinable, non-stereotypical, since they often present opposites aspects of the self. Later, they will produce their own self-portrait work with their own cameras, inspired by the exercises instructions but encouraged to change them by following their creative whims. Then, the shifting plays of power will mainly happen within the participant through self-challenge, between them and their cameras, and later with the public. According to Foucault,

power can only be exercised on free subjects, that is, those “who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving... may be realised” (Foucault 1982, p.790). This protocol and the workshop programme are published in my books, website and videos, which participants are encouraged to watch, so that they know exactly how it works before joining the workshop.

In prisons, the narration of my addiction and recovery works as a presentation of the workshop, after which inmates will decide whether to participate or not. Autobiographical disclosure allows me to create a ‘peer to peer’ relationship; an approach that further defies plays of power, due to the equality provided by similar experiences and subjugated knowledges. A prison inmate in Bollate Penitentiary (Milan, 2017), when asked the reason for his participation to the workshop, asserted: “Cristina opened up and told us so much about herself, that I wanted to do like her”.²⁰ My use of the SPEX *dispositif* in prisons resonates with Foucault’s thought on criminal justice and partly on Bentham’s *panopticon* “at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualisation and totalisation, isolation and transparency” (Foucault 1984, p.217). SPEX uses a similar mechanism of observation to disrupt the implicit external *panopticon* –in the camera- by putting the participant both under observation (subject) and in the tower (spectator), but adding a third role, that of the author/artist who will transform the experience into a visual work. The aim in SPEX is the opposite of control and oppression of the participant. Their performative and experiential self-expression, the broadening of perception and the resulting self-knowledge and knowledge of others, as emerges from their feedback, allow inmates to contrast stigma and self-stigma by constantly reversing power roles.

In all contexts, the combination between the vulnerability of my autobiographical disclosure and the strength of my role as a facilitator, first introduces plays of power in SPEX. This interrogation has stimulated the awareness and ethical duty to address the ways I deal with power. I have started to explicitly discuss the plays of power in my workshops and give more emphasis to the possibility of recalcitrance, to make the process more transparent and the power roles more dynamic. Aligning with Judith Butler’s thought, simultaneity of mastery and submission which happen in processes of subjectification, provides the possibility of subversion (Butler 1995a). This synchronicity entails the necessary vulnerability both in myself as the facilitator and the participant, and can produce knowledge.

The apparatus (*dispositif*) is thus always inscribed into a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain limits of knowledge that arise from it and, to an equal degree, condition it.

²⁰ This is the feedback of G., an inmate of Bollate penitentiary in Milan, recorded on an audio interview.

The apparatus (*dispositif*) is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge. (Foucault 1980, p.194-96)

For Foucault, the plays of power produce the institutions' hegemonic knowledge, a knowledge aimed at control, whereas individuals, with their subjected knowledge, tend to remain in a stable vulnerable position, as much as the institution tends to avoid vulnerability in order to keep power and knowledge to itself. In SPEX the emotional-experiential aspect stimulates vulnerability, but as discussed earlier, the performative allows subversion and can therefore be empowering. Since the chosen images contain both aspects at the same time on both sides of the face, participants acknowledge the coexistence of these opposite qualities in the instant the picture was taken, and the possibility to use them. Thus, plays of power in SPEX can produce in participants the kind of subjugated knowledge which, according to Foucault, implicates "a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts" (Foucault 1977, p.83): a self-knowledge and relational knowledge of their and others' emotions and inner struggles and of their place and resources in power relations. These knowledges are aimed at their empowerment as artists and activists.

If and when participants decide to do so, the dissemination by publication of these self-portraits and autobiographical projects, by means of their performative element can become another play of power between the participant and the public. It is an act of vulnerability and at the same time, the strength of being activists and speakers for others. The blend of emotional vulnerability and the performative strength can provoke uncomfortable mirroring in the viewer and draw their attention to the pain of others, and by reflection, to their own.

Through the process of subverting societal stereotyping and stigmatisation, subjugated knowledges emerge through the deconstruction of dichotomies in all steps of the *dispositif*. There are several binaries that occur; unconscious to conscious, vulnerabilities transform to powers, emotional perceptions become rational, submission turns to mastery, experiential switches to performative, ugly to beautiful and private into public. Shifting plays of power stimulate the search for balance, complementarity and interchangeability between opposites. This is a constantly oscillating process in which the opposites shift backwards and forwards.

Another dichotomy must now be deconstructed, the one that juxtaposes the two main methodologies of this research. One could speculate that psychological inquiry addresses the unconscious, emotional, vulnerable, experiential and private; whereas the conscious, powerful,

performative and public could be said to belong to the political framework. But as discussed above, all the processes happening in the *dispositif* support transformation, rehabilitation into something else. For instance, making unconscious material conscious and gaining self-awareness by means of the self-portrait can be empowering for vulnerable groups. The shifting plays of power can provide empowerment and knowledge of oneself and others. The broadening of perception fosters the discovery of potential and can therefore bring will power and strategic thinking in participants who are going through hard times.

The SPEX *dispositif* can likewise provoke the merging of and oscillation between the different fields within which it operates: social sciences, the arts and health. In the next chapter, the SPEX *dispositif* will be confronted to its context, namely:

- Contemporary usage of the self-portrait by the general public: the *selfie*
- Contemporary artists using their faces and bodies in their artworks
- Other practitioners' use of photography in a transformative way.

CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT

The aim of this chapter is to examine the context in which the SPEX *dispositif* is working and how it contributes to knowledge of the field(s). As mentioned earlier, my practice is primarily situated in contemporary art, while combining and interweaving aims, procedures and techniques with the therapeutic field. A third sociological area allows me to define the SPEX self-portrait as opposed to the *selfie*.

2.1. The self-portrait in the digital era

SPEX, although initiated much before the *selfie*, places itself in a clear opposition to it in several ways: artistically, psychologically and socio-politically. However, I have no intention of devaluing or pathologizing the *selfie*, as some current writers do (McKay 2014, Nauert 2015, Gregoire 2015), but I recognise that it can be a tool to affirm existence in time and place by “putting the subject and the self at the centre” (Fausing 2014, p.1). The *selfie* generally starts as public image, to be published immediately in the social networks services (SNS). It could be defined as a portrait of the photograph’s author, generally produced with a frontal camera of a smartphone or tablet, controlled, produced and selected according to the image the author intends to share with the world through social networks. *Selfies* usually follow an implicit social norm: if we want to be successful in all fields of life, we must be strong and happy, or at least show that we are. According to Senft and Baym, “selfies function both as a practice of everyday life and as the object of politicising discourses about how people ought to represent, document, and share their behaviours” (Senft and Baym 2015, p.1589). When I started taking self-portraits in 1988 there were no mobile phones and photography was only analogic and the self-portrait was not at all a widespread practice as it is today. A considerable number of my self-portraits were taken with analogic photography. But digital photography is crucial in SPEX workshops: we perceive the images immediately after taking them.

In SPEX, as opposed to the *selfie*, the self-portrait serves as an inwards-oriented, uncomfortable image, produced with artistic intention and process, less controlled than the *selfie*. The aim is not self-marketing to conform to social norms as in the *selfie*, but to allow our unconscious to speak with the language of art, stimulating an open and profound self-dialogue with unrecognised aspects of ourselves. The self-portrait is generally produced over a longer span of time and with a camera,

although it can also be produced with a smartphone or tablet. Despite its intimacy and depth, the SPEX self-portrait can be published, thus becoming a subversive act.

The *selfie* is in itself an apparatus, but the plays of power involved are very different to those in SPEX. Firstly, *selfie*-makers intentionally turn the lens to themselves but subvert the power of the camera in its capacity to access the unconscious. This is achieved by looking at themselves in the frontal camera to control their appearance according to chosen stereotypes, and later by deleting the images that do not match how they want to be seen by others. Subversion to implicit norms regarding the separation between the private and public spheres occurs mostly through the construction of an acceptable public image. Unconscious expression and the resulting vulnerability is generally avoided: the *selfie*-maker must feel strong and happy and images that do not express this will be immediately deleted, because looking at them might disrupt the positive attitude and cause unwanted feelings.

I started working with teenagers in 2008. I've noticed a difference between how youth used the self-portrait before and after the *selfie*-boom in 2012, in terms of their active participation in the workshop, producing emotional images and sharing them with the group. Before the *selfie*, they didn't appear so concerned about how they looked in the images. Most of them showed their images to the group, whereas after the *selfie*-boom and its use in the social networks, they were more reluctant to produce or show their self-portraits. This might be due to what Chae calls the "discrepancy between reality and ideal" and

Individuals who often take selfies are likely to have an idealised virtual self-image (...). If the person not only takes selfies but also edits them, the discrepancy might become greater (Chae 2017, p.375)

As mentioned earlier, the constant deletion of all "ugly selfies" suggests a crisis of identity in adolescents: if the images in which we don't like or recognise ourselves provide an opportunity for the construction and re-programming of our identity, as Lacan's theory suggests, what will happen to the adult identity of all those teenagers who constantly delete these images?

A little before and after the *selfie*-boom, most of the three-hundred adolescents who participated in the projects *Sono Io!* and *#Closetome*,²¹ organised by the Museum of Contemporary Photography in

²¹ *Sono Io!* (2011) and *#Closetome* (2015) are two projects for teenagers in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Milan, involving over three hundred adolescents at schools in central Milan and province. All participants produced self-portraits with their own cameras and fifty participated in collaborative self-portrait sessions, and their works were exhibited at

Cinisello, understood the sense of the *dispositif* and produced aesthetically powerful images expressing emotions such as sadness, anger and fear. Diletta Zanelli (2014), head of the educational department at MUFOCO writes, on the project's page in the museum's website:

Students had the opportunity to question their own identity and the relationships they create with those around them. (...) The process has brought adolescents to develop their perception and autonomous critical thought towards the images and consequently, towards reality. The photo diptych they produced has questioned the superficial and instantaneous aspects of the use of photography in the age of social networks, to contribute to compose thoughtful and contemplative photographs.

The *selfie* phenomenon has amplified the public's and the media's attention on the self-portrait practice including SPEX. It has likewise intensified my will to divulge and explain possible uses of SPEX to challenge conventions of representing the self. For example, the SPEX criteria of perception can be used to avoid deleting 'ugly selfies' and discovering important aspects of oneself, to subvert a social trend which tends to dismiss vulnerability and emotional expression.

2.2. Emotions and affect in contemporary art.

However, there are contemporary artists, mostly women, who have taken over the space of the *selfie* to question its slavery to implicit social norms and propose new thought provoking content. In her *Anti-Selfies* series, Dutch artist Melanie Bonajo directly addresses emotional issues and shows what is normally not shown in her photographic work.

the museum. The exhibit *Close to Me* consisted of three parts: an installation of five vertical monitors showing the works produced by participants, a wall installation with over five hundred images taken by other teenagers, and my work *Two Minutes* with video portraits of teenagers. A backstage video documents the project, including participants' feedback.

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10. Melanie Bonajo (2008), *Thank You For Hurting Me I Really Needed That*.

Furthermore, she declares that her work has provided wellbeing:

I see how my period of illness has led me to understand and empathise with the large-scale problem of depression that modern Western society creates. Which is an individualistic, isolated, competitive, stressed out lifestyle based on monetary success and social status. (...) Happiness ultimately doesn't flow from material obsessions.

I started to take the pictures of myself crying as a way of putting myself outside of the situation of sadness and looking at myself from the point of view of an observer. As soon as you point the camera to yourself, you take yourself out of the moment and look at the situation from the perspective of an observer. (Bonajo 2014)

This detachment from the emotional self, as in SPEX, allows a change of self-perception. But for what purpose?

The best cure for sadness is humour, or maybe the other way is better, that sadness occurs by lack of humour. Even while being sad, a part of me was aware of the ridiculousness and selfishness of my melancholy (Bonajo 2014)

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11. Melanie Bonajo (2008), *Thank You For Hurting Me I Really Needed That*.

But isn't humour a temporary cure? Can melancholy be labelled as selfish, and therefore to be avoided? In the *Recoverist Manifesto*, Will Self writes, "We need to feel and be felt by feeling people" because "it is a necessary condition of the spirituality we struggle to attain", to achieve recovery. Bonajo's work was a political act to subvert the *selfie* trends but I believe that more uncomfortable work would be needed to really address the problem of emotional expression in contemporary art.

A more disturbing self-portraiture in contemporary art is that of Elina Brotherus' *Time Series IV*, very different from her prevailing work. A generation older than Bonajo, Brotherus took a hundred close-up images of her face changing every day while she was taking cortisone. The series was exhibited in the Bloomberg Space gallery in London in 2010.



12. Elina Brotherus (2010), *Time Series IV*

These images are not on her website or books, nor were they selected for her anthological exhibition in Montpellier in 2016 and the Bloomberg Space gallery is now closed, so the project remains invisible. Perhaps they are too disturbing and not aligned with most of her work, which is contemplative and provides pleasant feelings in viewers.

In my conversation with Brotherus in March 2019²², I asked her if this was because it was considered too disturbing. She had never really thought about this but agreed. None of her commercial galleries has ever wanted to show the series. Brotherus feels that nobody wants to see a sick face and she would never hang those pictures on her walls either. She asserts “I don’t fight the art market, I want to be part of it, which brings me a sense of belonging, a sense of value, of being worthy.” In this sense, unlike myself, Brotherus does not intend to be political, nor question contemporary art’s rules. However, I have always been intrigued and influenced by her work. In my autobiographical project *La Vie en Rose* my figure is often surrounded by beautiful landscapes and the sound and the ‘temps mort’ are meant to create a contemplative atmosphere, similarly to Brotherus’ work.

²² See Appendix No. 4.

2.3. Phototherapy and therapeutic photography

I have been connected with other practitioners in the field through an international network since the International Conference on Phototherapy and Therapeutic Photography in Turku, Finland, in 2008, where I presented my practice and method. And yet, my practice cannot be considered ‘photo-therapy’, because it is not therapy and I am not a therapist.

In her website *PhotoTherapy & Therapeutic Photography Techniques*, Judy Weiser, a psychologist and art-therapist who started using photographs in her practice in 1975, identifies the difference between phototherapy and therapeutic photography which helps me situate my practice:

Therapeutic Photography is the name for photo-based activities that are self-initiated and conducted by oneself (or as part of an organised group or project), but where no formal therapy is taking place and no therapist or counsellor needs to be involved.

In contrast with PhotoTherapy techniques — which are *therapy practices* — Therapeutic Photography techniques are *photographic practices*, where the intended goal is to produce positive change in individuals, couples, or families —but they also include broader Social Action Photography techniques where the goal is to improve well-being, reduce social exclusion, and create positive change at community, societal, national, or international levels. (Weiser 2012)

Therapists exert a role of power, aligning themselves on a par with the medic. The client does not have the therapist’s knowledge, achieved through extensive training and theoretical knowledge of disciplines and frameworks. Not being a licensed therapist, but an artist and a ‘peer’ -expert by experience-, I know as much as the client, both our knowledges being ‘unqualified’. The medical model excludes society’s response to the individual. My practice is intrinsically social and multi-disciplinarian and possesses a plurality of purposes, not only ‘therapeutic’, which makes the use of the word ‘transformative’ more appropriate and inherent to the creative process.

Weiser is not an artist but a psychologist. Like most photo-therapists and unlike myself, she gives more importance to the therapeutic process than the creative one. Weiser does not study or take into account what is central to SPEX: the unconscious creative process and the production of artworks. She often states that she works with family snaps, not with art photography, in order to make it

accessible to everyone, but SPEX makes art accessible to everyone. A high number of therapists participate to my workshops, wanting to learn how the creative process can be transformative and helpful in their practice.

As a therapist, Weiser is more interested in what the client says and perceives in the images, rather than in the facilitator's or others' perceptions. My workshop participants, when looking at images of themselves, tend to look for and express what they know already, and often fall into self-judgement. As emerging from the questionnaire data, allowing my and the group's imaginative and subjective projections can provide insightful connections between workshop participants, as if they could look directly into the subject's life experiences without knowing anything about them. The aim is not to make a diagnosis or to establish the client's truths, but to stimulate thought, self-awareness and growth by exploring the multiple perceptions. This is reflected in the analysed data.

The SPEX *dispositif* finds important reference in the British inquiry report, *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing - Second Edition* (2017). The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) conducted this research in the arts in health and social care. The aim was to improve awareness of the benefits that the arts, not only art-therapy, can bring to health and wellbeing, with a view to making recommendations to improve policy and practice. On page 79, the report refers to a European project in which I involved a group of *Recoverists* in a self-portrait experience, in collaboration with Portraits of Recovery, as an example of how art can provide wellbeing.²³

While Weiser was starting phototherapy in Canada, British artist and activist Jo Spence worked in a similar way as myself: she used her life in her artistic practice exposing her authentic self, in her response to treatment as a breast cancer patient and was politically motivated as a feminist practitioner.

²³ “On a related note, the high proportion of addiction among marginalised people was addressed in an international project led by Portraits of Recovery between 2012 and 2014. The Director of Arts for Health, Clive Parkinson, involved disenfranchised people from the UK, Italy and Turkey in high-quality artistic experiences, with artists acting as facilitators of social change within recovery from substance misuse. Building on ideas in the USA Bill of Recovery Rights, a shared statement – *The Recoverist Manifesto* – was developed, which attempted to dispel the myths associated with substance misuse, reframing addiction as a cultural issue and recovery as a civil rights concern.”

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13. Jo Spence (1982-1986), *The Picture of Health*.

British artist and photo-therapist Rosy Martin worked with Jo Spence to create 're-enactment photo-therapy' in the 70's and has improved the method over the years in her research and her workshops. In her own definition:

Re-enactment phototherapy is about making visible process, change and transformation, by going to the source of an issue or an old trauma, re-enacting it and making a new ending; a new possibility; a new way of being, visible. (Martin 2013, p.72)

Spence and Martin did not give importance to the final choice of the artworks as carriers of possible utterances from the unconscious, as in SPEX. They neither worked in-depth on the subject's facial expression on the images to allow multiple perceptions. Re-enactment photo-therapy has also a different approach to power dynamics:

Unlike the traditional power relationship in portrait photography, the photographer/therapist's gaze does not attempt to control, nor objectify the other. The client, as sitter/director, determines how s/he wants to be represented (Martin 2009)

During the SPEX collaborative self-portrait sessions, I don't reject the power roles, but facilitate the switching from one role to the other, as discussed earlier. This can empower participants to become social activists through their autobiographical work.

SPEX cannot be said to belong to the therapeutic/psychological field, which operates in absolute privacy. I'm an artist exposing my work to an audience and encouraging the publication of participants' autobiographical images and projects. SPEX is an artistic tool and belongs mainly to the field of contemporary art, using the creative process in a multi-disciplinary way, collaborating in and influencing other fields: the psychological, the philosophical, the political and the sociological. However, the place of contemporary art in SPEX especially interacts with the therapeutic/psychological, because the latter's aim is individual change and SPEX considers individual change as a first step towards social transformation: if most of us undergo inner change, there will be societal benefits. The latter will be examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3. SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. The SPEX *dispositif* as social activism

Social activism is generally understood as the organisation of public actions with the aim of bringing about social change in any field. In my case, I do not organise events to make claims about issues, but I have been raising awareness about the social considerations discussed in this chapter through my art practice, workshops and conferences since 2008. Moreover, I have disseminated images and projects of marginalised individuals, making their voices visible through my public speaking, online videos and exhibitions, to reduce social stigma. The high number of press articles²⁴ about my work with myself and others has helped this dissemination and shows the cross-cultural range of my work. As in other activisms, social transformation is the aim, as discussed below.

Throughout this Critical Appraisal I have used words like subversion, resistance, recalcitrance and the shift of power roles, both referring to the structure of the *dispositif* during the workshops and autobiographical practice, and to the exposure to the public by means of critical outputs.

Nonetheless, further aspects can be useful to underline the reasons why SPEX can be used as a tool for social transformation and social activism, and to suggest its original contribution.

3.1.1. Humans need emotional expression

Due to social expectations to always be ‘strong’, ‘happy’ and ‘nice to others’, from an early age we are being taught to disregard and suppress other emotions such as sadness, fear, shame and in particular anger, lest we might be labelled as weak, aggressive or problematic. But these emotions need expression and sharing, as emerging from the feedback questionnaires and from a statement by recovery activist Michaela Jones in the film *Wonderland*:

I always think that addiction is a logical response. We’re told pain is a bad thing, we’re told fear is a bad thing. If you have a headache, take a pill. Mine has been a process of, it’s ok to feel these things, they’re not death! Death is not feeling. And yet, I live in a culture where everyone is trying not to feel all the time (Jones, 2016).

²⁴ See Appendix No.4. Peer Evaluation (press dossier).

This is why I have excluded 'joy' from the instructions to the emotions exercise, although this does not mean that participants cannot subvert these instructions and express joy, in fact some do. I see joy as generally connected to the public dimension than to the intimacy of self-exploration. Expressing happiness or joy in pictures is what social norms expect us to do and how we generally like to appear, so it might not trigger the internal plays of power that other emotions do. Nonetheless, all emotions, both 'positive' and 'negative' can emerge from the images, not only those proposed, which are only a catalyst to stimulate the unconscious creative process.

Since some people have questioned me "why not joy?" I accepted to test it, but the resulting images were not what I consider aesthetically powerful. They appeared to me as public images rather than showing the subject's inner world. I didn't perceive a multiplicity of emotions in the photographs as with other feelings. There is one exception though, of an image I cannot display here²⁵ by a prison inmate in Barcelona, who produced an astonishingly joyful image of himself with open arms, as if dancing and laughing with the happiest expression one can imagine. In prison joy could need expression and can trigger the internal plays of power, and when participants express joy they are probably subverting my instructions. As one inmate asserts: "In this moment, the most difficult emotion would be the joy, you know, because of where I am."

Something different happened with 'euphoria', which I have sometimes included in an intuitive and experimental way. Being an extreme version of happiness, it can carry the participant into their inner world and provide aesthetically powerful images which generally express more emotional multiplicity. Opposite emotions were perceived in the image below, produced in 2010 during a workshop for women at The Private Space gallery in Barcelona: although at first glance we saw euphoria, we then identified despair and terror, and recalled the photograph by Nick Ut of the crying Vietnamese girl.

²⁵ I do not have his authorisation to publish his images.



Mariela (2010), *Higher Self* series. Collaborative self-portrait in a workshop for women. The Private Space gallery, Barcelona.

In SPEX emotions ‘stay’ in the picture so that we can look at them, acknowledge them, understand and find sense in them, perhaps find the unmet needs, and discover the multiplicity of our identity. Participant Valentina states:

You descend in your darkest place, and after some hesitation, your ugly thoughts emerge in your mind and you feel ready to press the remote control and take the picture, to explode them with your whole face and body, into the picture. (...) You can see your pain and weaknesses in front of you, they are no longer in you but fixed in the computer screen, out of yourself! (Valentina 2019)²⁶

²⁶ Valentina’s feedback has been collected by Lucia Alessandrini, SPEX facilitator, who held that workshop and was trained by myself in 2017. I have trained thirty SPEX facilitators. Seven of them use SPEX regularly. Future developments of this research will focus on this training and the impact achieved by them. In the prison data analysis (Appendix N.2 Impact) there is an example of an ex-inmate who has become a SPEX facilitator, page 30.

This is the catalytic quality of the unconscious creative process in SPEX that transforms emotions into images, allowing participants to change their emotional state. As discussed earlier, this is provoked by the shifting plays of power while the images are produced.

3.1.2. The emotional face as a mirror

Sharing emotions and needs through the multiple perceptions of self-portraits among workshop participants can mirror back a mutual sense of humanity which supports identification rather than dissociation and alienation. A similar effect can be achieved with the publication of the autobiographical images or projects. According to Margot Phaneuf, “the mirror effect is a reflection of oneself through the gazes of others” and it can provide self-knowledge because it fosters an on going restructuring of one’s self-image. Our identity can be delineated through the other’s gaze, in order to pursue its perpetual evolution (Phaneuf 2005, p.1). Through the inter-subjective exchange between subject and viewers, the latter are thus tacitly invited to reflect themselves, to go through a similar emotional process as the author of the work, who can acquire the role of the speaker for others. Interrogating the photograph as a speech act, Laura Levin asserts that

certain speech acts are said to have “performative force,” that is, the capacity to produce what they name, to directly affect their audience, or, as Derrida argues, to transform the world (Gould 1995: 25). (Levin 2009, p.329)

In her essay about the *Wonderland* artist books, published on the project website, PhD student Gemma Meek²⁷ expresses the possible reasons of her discomfort while looking at the books:

The *Wonderland* artist books through this perspective demand the reader to question what it means to feel, in all its pain and hardship, through images of bruised bodies, hospital beds, moments with loved ones, barren landscapes and potentially painful memories. As a reader, I feel provoked to consider what it might be like to turn the lens on myself, on my own image and to question how I might be seen by others. Perhaps my initial reaction of discomfort is because of my own fear at the thought of barring my own skin, memories and experiences, to share what I consider my humanity. (Meek, 2016)

²⁷ Gemma Meek is an Arts and Humanities Research Council NWCDTP funded PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research project aims to conceive of a definition and critical framework in which to read socially engaged book art (2000 onwards) through the selection of case studies and mapping of practices and book forms.

The mirroring effect of most SPEX images is mainly achieved by highlighting the participant's non-stereotypical face in those images we consider as potential artworks. Being used to see stereotypical faces in the social networks and advertising, these images are striking and often uncomfortable because they are indefinable. Some reject the images as too heavy, "too much focused on the negative" as emerged from the data: could this mean that they have acknowledged some mirroring? But if they worked on the multiple perceptions of those images, they could discover more 'positive' aspects thereby changing their perception. Others accept the mirroring, perhaps because they are already confronting their own conflicts, and this identification can provide empathy, and by reflection, self-empathy.

Mirroring is enhanced by emotional expression, and facing our own afflictions and fears can indeed be scary. "Nobody wants to see a sick face", Brotherus asserts, and she would not hang her own sick face on her walls. We are often manipulated by photojournalism to watch the pain of others in images that are contextualised in a certain situation. As Sontag (2003) discusses in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, we can feel a certain attraction towards this. The direct contemplation of an emotional non-stereotypical face with no context, as in the *Higher Self* images, even takes away this possible delight in looking at the pain of others, because we cannot circumscribe it only to that situation, we cannot avoid looking at ourselves. But the identification with the subject of the image, if we take our time to contemplate its face in the image and perceive it in-depth, can foster an inward exploration of the myriad of emotions and attitudes, not all to be proud of, emerging when we look at the pain of others. In Sontag's words:

Plato appears to take for granted that we also have an appetite for sights of degradation and pain and mutilation. (Sontag 2003, p.76)

If, instead of avoiding vulnerability, we could acknowledge all our emotions, this self-questioning could result in a useful training for authentic human connection and can liberate the empathic gaze.

3.1.3. The Useful Art

Foucault asserts that the *dispositif* responds to an urgency (Foucault, 1977). SPEX can work as a link between art and human emotional life, as a way to make art more personal, more urgent, more effective, more understandable, more universal. The SPEX *dispositif* aligns itself with Tania

Bruguera's artistic current "Arte Útil" (Useful Art)²⁸ as opposed to the 19th Century slogan Art for Art's Sake²⁹ which still underpins most of contemporary art. The Tate website defines The Useful Art Association as promoting

the idea of art as a process that should have real effect in society as part of everyday life, rather than a rarefied spectator experience. (...) Viewers are transformed into activated users, shifting the role of art from the passive realm of aesthetics to one of action and activism". (...) As Bruguera describes it, 'useful art is about transforming people's lives, even on a small scale. It is art as activism and activism as art'.

What is urgently needed is to put art to the service of human needs. Tania Bruguera states, in an interview by Joselyn Contreras for Artishock online magazine:

The goal is not to provoke a smile, but to create a process through which we can elaborate things that are difficult to digest and accept, but that must be expressed and done if we want to build another society, and thus, not only solidarity but also friction can be an effective tool. (Bruguera 2017, author's translation)

Friction and the plays of power can be useful to initiate change, because conflict causes suffering, stimulating the search for balance and reconciliation. It seems the 'useful art' movement is getting stronger nowadays. Museums and major art fairs are finally including 'useful' projects and mentioning the transformative power of art: Pedro Reyes' *Sanatorium*, *The Abramovic Method* and the exhibition *Art is Therapy* at the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands.

The aim of SPEX is to produce art for the use of, and in collaboration with the community, as in the Deweyian notion of 'popular art' accessible to everyone and to demonstrate that anyone can take part in a creative process and even prepared/guided to produce artworks. As Paul di Felice opines,

criteria based on beauty or *photogenia* are not favoured by Nuñez's method. On the

²⁸ <http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/> Arte Útil projects should: 1) Propose new uses for art within society; 2) Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates; 3) Respond to current urgencies; 4) Operate on a 1:1 scale; 5) Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; 6) Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; 7) Pursue sustainability; 8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.

²⁹ *Art for art's sake*, a slogan translated from the French *l'art pour l'art*, which was coined in the early 19th century by the French philosopher Victor Cousin. The phrase expresses the belief held by many writers and artists, especially those associated with Aestheticism, that art needs no justification, that it need serve no political, didactic, or other end. Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/art-for-arts-sake>

contrary, her system is closer to the Deweyian aesthetic and artistic experience in seeking, through questioning, “to restore the continuity between those refined and more intense forms of experience that are the works of art and actions, suffering and daily events universally recognised as elements that make up experience”.(Dewey 1915 cited in Di Felice 2012)

In my workshops, people who lack artistic skills –teenagers, prisoners- easily access the unconscious creative process and produce what I refer to as self-portrait artworks, not only in the studio, when facilitated by myself but also on their own, as emerges from the #*Closestome* project. This suggested to me the idea of a universal creative process, accessible to anyone and connected to human emotions. A participant of the *Wonderland* project asserted, “Before this, I thought art was for other people”. As Stefano Ferrari asserts:

Indeed in her workshops Cristina, as an artist herself, teaches her students to examine and analyse the images on a formal level, and tries to impart a certain sensibility that properly belongs to the sphere of art and aesthetics. In this sense each one can effectively become an artist or at least aspire to being one. (Ferrari 2012, p.16)

The mirroring that occurs in others’ images suggests that these photographs can represent universal aspects of the human being and that they allow us to access a space common to us all, as De Luigi suggests:

As in a hall of mirrors, human emotions unite us across time and space, the entire history of images and of our own civilisation (De Luigi 2012, p.18).

Curators of the *Higher Self* exhibition at the Casino of Luxemburg wrote:

The performances for the camera bring out intense moments of extreme expression, revealed in artistic language that echoes the iconographic tradition of representing suffering and the human condition. (Di Felice, Muhlen and Stiwer 2011)

These images could actually be my own self-portraits through others’ faces, as an interrogation of the artist’s multiple identities. In a way, by connecting to the ‘other’ in me, looking and identifying with the ‘other in the other’, identities mingle and we are not just ourselves anymore, we become speakers of others.

3.1.4. *Recoverism* to reduce social stigma

“L’Art pour l’Art” statement idolises artworks and acclaimed artists. If there is something that could eventually be put on a ‘pedestal’, this could be the artworks produced by people who suffer from ostracism, in order to reverse the power dynamics and find the beauty and the epical qualities in those stigmatised. Using the *dispositif* with stigmatised people, during addiction recovery or in the process of desistance from crime, is another way of shifting power roles. Firstly, they can overcome self-stigma by discovering unknown potential which allows them to avoid the internalisation of stigma. And secondly, when their self-image is empowered, they can fight stigmatisation by sharing this process to others through publication. Both recovery and desistance subvert stereotypes often associated with addicts and prison inmates. Addicts in recovery and criminals who desist from crime generally hide their past, but if they don’t, they can perform what Foucault calls an “insurrection of subjugated or disqualified knowledges”, as emerges from my TEDx talk.

... a differential knowledge, incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it- that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (Foucault 1977, p.82)

We Recoverists,³⁰ including those who desist from crime, can inspire others to reconstruct their identity after critical or painful times. Both recovery and desistance involve a radical transformation of identity which influences both self-image and public image. Clive Parkinson writes in the *Recoverist Manifesto*:

Our shared voices will confront and educate those who demonise and stigmatise us.
(Parkinson 2014, p.5)

In the film *Wonderland*, recovery activist Michaela Jones asserts:

³⁰ *Recoverist* is a term created by Mark Prest of Portraits of Recovery, a UK based international charity that supports people and communities affected by and in recovery from substance misuse to open up new ways of knowing and looking at the subject by working with contemporary visual art and artists. *Recoverist* is a person in recovery from substance misuse or mental health disorder.

My personal recovery is important, but an integral part of that personal recovery is doing my best, whatever that is, to spread the message to other people: coming out because I want to help people. (Jones 2016)

Another *Wonderland* participant commented on how the project provided a creative space that aroused activism:

Amazing weekend with thinking, feeling people who are brimming full of ideas and actions to make the world a better place for us all.

I often say, as in my TEDx talk, that SPEX is about transforming “shit into diamonds”, referring to the fact that we use our painful emotions (shit) to produce art that will be shown to the public in order to cause mirroring and identification, and therefore become socially useful and engaging (diamonds). The diaporama *Someone to Love* has been seen more than 200.000 times, stimulating messages of acknowledgement and participation to the SPEX workshops. When we share our autobiographical projects with an audience, they are not ours anymore; they become useful for the community. This is why my autobiographical videos are published via the Internet, for everyone to see. And the societal benefits in the form of the public’s thank you messages drives the author to give even more value and acceptance to their own “shit”, as a way to deeply connect with others.

SPEX can become a tool for social activism through the publication of participants’ autobiographical projects: “spreading the message” as Michaela suggests, to perform the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’. Projects such as *Wonderland*, *#Closetome* and *We Exist* had obtained the necessary funding in order to be disseminated. But not all projects can be properly exhibited, this is why I always suggest participants to find ways to show their work to others, even through the social networks, where more authentic emotional expression could balance the implicit social norm of only showing happy moments. At the same time, exposing vulnerable collectives to publication raises ethical issues, to be discussed in the next section.

3.2. Ethical considerations

Ethical issues of the SPEX *dispositif* regarding safeguarding of wellbeing, authorship, ownership and publication of the images are complex, but addressing them is allowing me to inform my practice with others.

3.2.1. Emotional safeguarding

I have held most of the workshops for vulnerable collectives in institutions, in collaboration with the social workers, psychologists or psychotherapists, who already followed participants on a regular basis. Some projects with teenagers, such as *#Closetome* (2015) were conducted at school in collaboration with their teachers. Although most participants and their teachers gave a positive feedback, as emerging from the interviews in the backstage documentary³¹, one of the teachers, Maurizio Telloli, explained that a couple of students experienced strong inner turmoil concerning previous problems such as anorexia and bereavement:

At some point, Annalisa and myself (teachers) asked ourselves if this experience helped students or not. We believe they had the opportunity to express things they felt within, and that this can also be painful. We can therefore affirm that if a teenager is living an inner trouble, it can become explosive. (Telloli 2019)³²

#Closetome involved 250 teenagers, probably too many for our team to take care of each of them individually. A more careful approach would be needed, as well as the collaboration with the school's psychologist, both in the decision on students' participation, and on a psychological follow-up after the experience. It is likewise advisable to accurately inform the institution, its leaders and the students about possible risks and recommendations to ask for therapeutic support in the process in case of need.

In the project *Wonderland, the art of becoming human*, the Recoverists partnering the project decided that peer support was more powerful than external intervention from a therapist. In her paper, Professor Ravetz writes, "working with an artist who was 'part of the tribe' (i.e in recovery) made people feel safe, understood and able to take more risks in what they were able to achieve and gain from making the artwork" (Ravetz 2017, p.7). Participants were less vulnerable than teenagers, being adults over forty years old in long-term recovery like myself, having experienced different kinds of therapeutic processes. Moreover, Professor Ravetz encouraged an open dialogue about recovery between us all as part of the project, which further empowered participants. Nonetheless, of the ten initial participants, four abandoned the project. Staying in the workshop might not always be the best outcome for participants. It can be healthy for them to quit,

³¹ <https://youtu.be/3WQuxaCBmRs>

³² Maurizio Teo Telloli, in an email to me, sent June 19, 2019.

if they feel it's too much for them at the moment. One of the four stated in the feedback questionnaires, when asked about the effects of the workshop:

Emotions were strong and I felt the need of my therapist to overcome the moment.

Another who dropped out half way asserted that he did so because he felt overwhelmed, but that the workshop gave him “a lot of confidence” and the will power to pursue other artistic experiences. The remaining six produced their autobiographical artist books by the end of the workshop, which were shown at the Utopia Fair in London, and most of them expressed satisfaction about the whole experience. One of the participants said:

The project helped us to own our humanity, become more compassionate towards each other and ourselves, and feel less stigmatised by our mental health and substance use disorder issues and histories.

One could assume that participants of my workshops for the general public are less vulnerable than the above-mentioned cases. However, the open-ended feedback in the 2018-19 questionnaires raise important issues, demanding that ethical guidelines concerning emotional safeguarding are needed for all participants, being this practice different from photo-therapy and other methods. The theoretical framework of this research, in particular the awareness and transparency of the plays of power and participants' possibility of recalcitrance have informed my practice in several ways and can set the grounds for the creation of an ethical code of practice. Firstly, research has allowed me to better understand cases in which participants have a negative experience and secondly to prepare myself and them for transparent and shifting plays of power in order to avoid, as much as possible, negative experiences and safeguard their emotional wellbeing. I have recently introduced a pre-workshop form in which participants provide information about themselves, such as education, profession, previous practice on the self-portrait, therapeutic experiences and other practices to deal with their emotions. Respondents acknowledge that: 1) they know the process involves emotional expression and that I am not a therapist or doctor; 2) they are not going through neurological or psychiatric treatment and 3) they have not suffered from heart diseases or epilepsy.

Another ethical issue is the publication of images of stigmatised people, such as prison inmates, addicts or mental health patients. Of over four hundred prison inmates who participated in the workshops, two hundred and twenty signed the authorisation for publication. In these workshops we discussed this at length at the end of the workshop, in order to allow them an informed decision.

Some of those who signed said they were inspired by my own speaking out about my addiction and recovery. As mentioned earlier, the decision not to conceal our difficult experiences is another subversion of power roles that happen in the process of stigmatisation.

Nonetheless, these groups remain vulnerable in the sense that they might not be fully aware of the stigma they might face when disclosing their stories. It is also possible that they authorise publication out of sympathy or influenced by others' decisions, or that they are so used to and even proud of the label 'criminal' that they don't even contemplate desistance. My own doubts about my right to expose their vulnerability to stigmatisation from the public are preventing me to cause further exposure. At the same time, it is precisely the exposure to the public which can combat stigmatisation by proposing an encounter between the stigmatised and the non-stigmatised or those who stigmatise. In the *We Exist* online exhibition my assistants' and my self-portrait appears amidst those of the inmates, with no distinction, challenging stigma through exposure.

3.2.2. Authorship, ownership and publication

There are no authorship issues with the images produced by my workshop participants with their own cameras, since these are entirely owned by them. Some of them have given written consent for their publication on my website or in my presentations. As for the collaborative self-portraits produced in my studio, following is an overview of how I have been dealing with this up to date.

Collaborative self-portraits can be, if participants agree, part of the *Higher Self* series, which I started in 2008. Of the over three thousand and seven hundred images produced, approximately seven hundred could be part of the *Higher Self* series, since they have given their written consent. Up to date I have proposed a tacit agreement with my workshop participants, based on the following terms:

1. Anyone can participate in the collaborative self-portraits in my studio, with the right to deny any form of publication. I never publish or show their images to anyone without their written consent.
2. In case participants agree that I include their image in *Higher Self*, they sign a release³³ for its publication in a number of media or show them in my presentations. The release does not

³³ See Appendix No.3, Ethics.

mention authorship or ownership, or the possibility that the images might be sold in a gallery. Until now, no *Higher Self* images have ever been proposed for sale in a gallery, since this has not been my priority.

3. If participants ask me who is the author or who owns the images, I usually say that being the idea/project, *Higher Self*, aesthetic choices and the performative instructions mine, I am the main author of the images, but if they desire to use the images in their own project, they can do so, while mentioning that they were produced in a SPEX workshop, in collaboration with me. In that case, a co-authorship is contemplated, but I have never proposed participants to sign a co-authorship agreement. Participants get jpg files of all images, but if an artist/photographer wants to use them for their own projects, they can get the Raw file. There are several publications of the *Higher Self* images, with my name as only author, and the name of the subject is the title of the image.

Committing to academic rigour has allowed me to better understand ethical issues in order to align with the aims and theoretical framework of my practice. This has led me to create a new agreement³⁴ with participants acknowledging co-authorship, co-ownership and joint copyright in different percentages (30% for the participant and 70% for myself). In case they agree that their images are part of the *Higher Self* project, they can authorise publication. Both parts can include the images in their projects, mentioning joint copyright. The reason I propose an unequal degree of authorship is that I am not asking the participant how he would like to be photographed, as Anthony Luvera does in his series “Assisted Self-portraits”, in which the participant becomes a co-creator of his self-portrait, and the photographer is the facilitator and technical advisor (Luvera, 2006, p.17). Participants decide to take part in my workshop knowing I am the artist and initiator of this process, not just the technical advisor. Unlike the traditional photographer, I lend participants a sense of authority in the process, since they decide what emotion to express, how to express it and when to take the picture. The reason why I am not there when the images are produced is crucial to the SPEX *dispositif*, to allow the participant to go through a deep inner journey. My absence is often perceived as presence, as participant Julien Redouard asserts, in the webdoc of the Grenoble project:

The artist is always present in some way. Without her there is no creative process. Even though you're on your own when you take the pictures, she's there, because there's her camera, her frame, the black backdrop. (Redouard, 2015)

³⁴ See Appendix No. 3. Ethics.

The artistic intention to produce artworks is functional to the main aim of the collaborative self-portraits: to show participants how to trigger an unconscious creative process, so that they will be able to continue independently, with their own cameras and aesthetic choices.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

4.1. Conclusion

This Critical Appraisal has examined the presented publications by interrogating the theoretical framework, context, impact and ethical considerations of the SPEX *dispositif* in its implementation both on others since 2004 (Higher Self) and on myself since 1988 (Someone to Love). The two methodological frameworks –the psychological and the philosophical/political of the *dispositif*- and the related empirical research have allowed me to propose the first stages of an ethical code of practice. This investigation can give a clearer idea to users and other scholars of the dynamics involved in and the impact achieved by SPEX.

The psychological framework has been utilised to examine firstly, my own autobiographical practice, exploring the catalytic process of transforming emotions into self-portraits and the perceptive work to foster self-awareness and empowerment. Secondly, I have interrogated the idea of the unconscious creative process drawing from Barthes, Benjamin, Didi-Hubermann and Freud. Impact emerging from the analysis of the 2018 feedback questionnaires on SPEX's effects on participants, supports the idea that SPEX is a tool for individual transformation, as the following trends suggest. Firstly, the SPEX *dispositif* allows participants to transform their emotional pain into photographs, triggering a creative process which is perceived by most as partly unconscious. A high number of participants do not recognise themselves in the images, suggesting that SPEX could be useful to make unconscious material emerge to consciousness. The resulting creative outputs allow for a process of recognition of the 'other' through a structured perceptive work, providing new insight and a broadening of perception of the self and of others, through the recognition of emotions, life experiences and values in the 'other' represented in the image. This process fosters the discovery of new potential for personal growth and facilitates the reconstruction of identity, addressing what I refer to as a crisis of identity in youth who constantly delete their 'ugly selfies'. A high number of respondents have stated that 1) the workshop stimulated them to listen to emotions that need expression; 2) they continue to use the method when they need to. These two statements could suggest that SPEX can be useful to detect emotions that need expression and secondly to actually transform them into photographs.

From a philosophical and political perspective, drawing from Foucault and Agamben, I have defined SPEX as a *dispositif*, a set of measures taken for a specific intervention. It involves shifting plays of power through the processes of subjectification and subversive performativity in all steps

of the *dispositif*: the production of images, the work on the multiple perceptions, the construction of autobiographical projects and their exposure to the public. These processes foster the deconstruction of dichotomies in all steps of the *dispositif*. There are several binaries that occur; unconscious to conscious, vulnerabilities transform to powers, emotional perceptions become rational, submission turns to mastery, experiential switches to performative, to beautiful and private into public. Shifting plays of power stimulate the search for balance, complementarity and interchangeability between opposites. This is a constantly oscillating process in which the opposites shift backwards and forwards. The power plays trigger the unconscious creative process during the production of images, providing critical outputs which can stimulate multiple perceptions through their performative utterances, both in the author/subject of the image and in others. The aim is participants' empowerment as activists and the production of several kinds of knowledge: of the self and their internal struggles, of one's and the other's emotions, and one's place in power relations with others and with society at large.

The prison questionnaires have been analysed through both the psychological and the philosophical/political frameworks. The first was utilised to support the broadening of perception of the self and of others, to back Porporino's (2010) recommendations to facilitate desistance in prison inmates, by providing programmes which allow them to see themselves through new lenses. The *dispositif* methodology examines issues of power dynamics, subjectification, performativity and the production of knowledge in the inmates' feedback responses. Both perspectives support the effectiveness of SPEX in a penitentiary context.

SPEX has been situated in and confronted to the three different fields in which it can be said to operate. Firstly, the sociological to define the main differences between the practice of the *selfie* and the SPEX self-portrait, and to underline the latter's contribution; secondly, contemporary art in the practice of two photographers, Melanie Bonajo and Elina Brotherus, who use their bodies, faces and lives in their work; and finally the field of phototherapy and therapeutic photography in the practice of Judy Weiser, Jo Spence and Rosy Martin. The outcome is the claim that SPEX is mainly a contemporary art tool, which involves and influences other fields, such as the psychological/therapeutic, the sociological and the political, in a multidisciplinary blend. Moreover, collaborations in other fields such as criminology and anthropology can further broaden the research and the application of the SPEX *dispositif* in other contexts.

The SPEX *dispositif* is an artistic tool aimed at social change. Sharing the outputs with the public can provide societal benefits through mirroring and identification, in order to draw social attention

to human emotions and needs for a more just and equitable society. Viewers' feedback on my autobiographical projects shows the mirroring process, which stimulates some of them to disclose their own emotions and life experiences. This results in a shared mutual understanding through emotional exchange and reciprocal identification between some viewers and myself. The publication becomes a political act, firstly, by subverting implicit social norms that demand always being happy in order to achieve success. Secondly, it fosters human connections in a society focused on competitive and thus alienating relationships between people. And thirdly, because mirroring oneself in someone's autobiographical disclosure can be uncomfortable, challenging viewers to feel and think about their own emotions and life experiences. Another social benefit in SPEX lies in the deconstruction of stigma and self-stigma related to labels and stereotypes often associated with offenders, people with mental health issues, people in recovery from substance misuse and other vulnerable groups. Thus autobiographical narratives by stigmatised individuals can work as an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 1977), which can 'educate' those who stigmatise them. SPEX aligns itself with the Useful Art Association, in that it uses participatory art to respond to current urgencies, providing beneficial outcomes for its users and re-establishing aesthetics as a system of transformation. The SPEX *dispositif* is available to and put into practice by anyone, no matter their artistic/technical skills, culture, gender, race or social status.

I have likewise examined ethical issues concerning firstly, the emotional safeguarding of vulnerable groups using SPEX, and secondly, the authorship/co-authorship, ownership and publication of the collaborative self-portraits produced during my workshops. This ethical investigation has further informed my present and future work with others.

The concepts and impact of this practice and its publications, examined in this Critical Appraisal, lead me to claim that SPEX is a new artistic *dispositif*, different from any other in its context. Firstly, the original contribution emerges from its cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary approach and application. Secondly, its uniqueness lies in the combination of the above-mentioned elements and the way these interact with one another, to form the SPEX *dispositif*. Thirdly, the apparatus, as a conglomerate and a network of elements and actions can produce specific effects on participants and on the public. The SPEX *dispositif* can therefore function as a tool for individual and social transformation.

4.3. Future developments

The concepts summarised above represent the foundation for future developments of my investigation, which might result in further research in an academic environment, publishing new books, papers and exhibitions, collaboration with other researchers and on other research projects. Thanks to the on-going practice on others and myself, research is constantly fed with new data, which I intend to keep on analysing, in order to continue the interrogation of the practice, its theoretical framework, ethical considerations and impact. Future research is still developing but will initially focus on how SPEX can address the crisis of identity mentioned earlier. Since March 2020 at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic I have developed SPEX approach into two new avenues: online workshops and a Youtube channel. The online workshops evidenced a new willingness for people to engage with SPEX due to their interest and availability to work on autobiographical projects whilst in lockdown. The methodology has worked equally well without physical contact and the results of this engagement will be published in due course. This remote engagement may not continue in post lockdown, but the advent of remote multiple conversations has been an effective development. Youtube short videos demonstrate what I refer to as the Emotional Revolution³⁵ through SPEX, and encourage users to upload their own photographs and videos, and then work on the multiple perceptions of the images. The Emotional Revolution proposes the dissemination of emotional images to support social change and the creation of a more just and equitable society, with a focus on authentic human needs instead of material growth, an area which has been more relevant than ever before. The concept of SPEX as a tool for social activism can further be examined in my autobiographical project *La Vie en Rose* and its impact on the public. Secondly, I will explore emotional and perceptive lateralisation in the human face on SPEX images, informed by current neurological pathways, using the *Higher Self* collection of images, which will be published as an online platform in the future. This could involve collaborations with researchers in the field of neurology. Further research can likewise be pursued on the practice of SPEX facilitators. I have trained thirty of them since 2012, some of whom have obtained similar benefits as myself, showing that SPEX can also work without my presence. Seven of them have been gathering data from their workshop participants and produced a dissertation about their experience with others and their own autobiographical process. Their experiences also appear in the video interviews I have filmed with them. The analysis of this data might support and enrich the theoretical framework examined in this Critical Appraisal or suggest new ways of looking at SPEX, since some of them have added their own skills to the *dispositif*.

³⁵ <https://selfportrait-experience.com/emotional-revolution/>

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