Photography, feelings and homes

Filippo Steven Ferrara, *University of Siena*

ABSTRACT

This selection of images is the result of a photography laboratory organized with children and teenagers aged between 9 and 14 over a period of six months, between April and September 2019. The laboratory was one of the two courses, painting and photography, *Angeli della Città* – a small volunteering organization based in the center of Florence providing clothing and food supplies to individuals and families living under the poverty threshold – organized in order to grant access to children and adolescents coming from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to artistic techniques, teachings and instruments which in most cases remain precluded to them. Through a personal approach to their subjects and to the photographic medium itself, the participants work creatively convey a unique representation of their environments and feelings.

KEYWORDS

photography, laboratory, access, representation, disadvantaged, children, Florence, volunteering, organization

BIO

After having pursued my bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology at the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, I studied photojournalism at Officine Fotografiche in Rome. Thanks to my first photographic project, *Samin*, I was selected for a fellowship program offered by the photo agency Parallelozero. Currently, as a freelance photographer, I'm working on a long-term commissioned project focusing on marginality in the city of Florence. In parallel to that, I lead photography courses and study anthropology at the University of Siena.

filipposteven@gmail.com

This selection of images is the result of a photography laboratory I led with children and teenagers aged between 9 and 14 over a period of six months, between April and September 2019. The laboratory was one of the two courses, painting and photography, *Angeli della Città* – a small volunteering organization based in the center of Florence providing clothing and food supplies to individuals and families living under the poverty threshold – was able to conduct thanks to financing from Regione Toscana.

The courses, and the photography laboratory in particular, were conceived as an expansion of the services provided to the organization's users in order to grant access to children and adolescents coming from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to artistic techniques, teachings and instruments which in most cases remain precluded to them due to the high costs they involve (e.g. for art and photography courses, cameras and SD cards, pencils and colors). As we applied for financing from Regione Toscana, we also made explicit our intention to donate the materials to the participants after the conclusion of the courses in order to not let them just be a timely limited experience, but rather a first step into a creative practice which later, if interested, the participants could continue practicing on their own.

At the same time, the idea has been not only to introduce the participants to an array of technical competences and stylistic know-hows, providing them, in the case of the photography laboratory, with camera equipment and introducing them to its use, but instead to accompany them through the development of a visual narration of theirselves and their home and familiar environment.

After a first phase in which I introduced the participants to the medium of photography and to a selection of remarkable photographic bodies of work which gave them a glimpse of the vastity of the medium's possible applications, followed by photo-walks through the city of Florence and different group and individual exercises on portraiture, landscape and street photography, we gradually began focusing more and more on visual storytelling and in particular on the different approaches of narration and self-representation the photographic medium makes possible.

The participants began taking pictures at home, during family trips to lakes and parks, on buses and in the streets. They photographed sunsets, night skies, silhouettes, statues, tourists, pigeons, buildings, vendors, pets, flowers, ice creams, walls, leaves, trees, water reflections, shadows and lights seeping in through windows. They portrayed parents, siblings and friends, exploring framings and lightings (natural and artificial), testing compositions and self-portraits techniques.

Gradually, as both the familiarity with the medium and the cohesion of the group grew, some of the participants began shifting from a mere documentary approach to their surroundings to a more introspective and conceptual one, turning their emotions and personal stories into central topics of their work which were later shared with the other participants. Joy, sadness, absence, anger, solitude and love began to be elaborated especially by the older participants through the use of light and shadows; black and white acquired expressive significance and posed self-portraits in many cases were the chosen technique of self-expression.

As I could observe, homes — apartments, housing projects and shelters for mothers and children — emerged as the most common contexts in which the participants made their pictures.

Staging portraits and self-portraits, focusing on details, photographing their mothers, siblings and fathers in the home environment, the participants explored their familiar environment rediscovering it through a personal photographic approach shedding a light on their intimacy and allowing the viewer to enter this sphere through personal perspectives.

But photographing their home environments was also interpreted in different ways, connected to moments of recreation with the family in the park, playful moments with siblings or to still photos of empty rooms and staged self-portraits expressing the photographers' feelings.

In many cases, a central element to the photos were windows, both as non-visible sources of light suggestively illuminating the depicted scene and as observation points from which capturing the outside world, being this the streets or a nocturnal sky.

Although the participants had been given instructions regarding the use and functioning of the camera and the work they had to do, each of them developed an individual approach to what and how to photograph. Nor was the classic 'individual authoriality' of the photographic act always followed, on the contrary: the siblings which were not allowed to participate due to the age limit we decided to pose to access the laboratory became assistants, models and pupils of their older sisters, appearing in several

photos taken at home; in the case of two siblings who both attended the course, the resulting work which was produced in the context of the shelter for mothers and children they lived in at the time with their mother resulted out of a photographic symbiosis in which the roles of the photographer and the model were constantly interchanged or even subverted by the use of the automatic shutter release.

Some of the participants adopted a playful, ironic approach to the photographs they shot; others a rather intimate one, using their camera in order to create visual notes depicting their mood and feelings. As one participant once wrote in a text message "The laboratory made me discover new things and above all I was able to express my feelings".

The participants had the weekly task to present the pictures taken during the week and to submit them to me and to the group, who commented and discussed, selected or discarded them. The alternation of these two moments was fundamental not only as it allowed to follow each other's work as it was created, but rather to also give the opportunity to the participants to experience how their photos may not just show what they objectively depicted — people, objects, rooms, shadows—, but at the same time could also convey an emotional content to the viewers. The weekly meetings we held at the oratory of the San Frediano in Cestello's church, in the Oltrarno area of Florence, represented thus an essential moment of exchange and discussion, underling the communicative potential of photography. With some moderation from my side, the participants showed admiration and dislike for each others' pictures, discussed the contents and the formal aspects giving constructive and in some cases also not-so-constructive comments and suggestions, sharing their own experiences and the difficulties they encountered.

Although some the aspects of the laboratory may be connected to photovoice practices – a participatory methodology used in social sciences basing on the creation of knowledge through photographs produced by marginalized community members as an alternative and empowering research medium from below – as it's participative character and in some means subversive aim to 'de-éliterize' the medium of photography turning it into a medium of self-expression and (self-)narration in the hands of individuals coming from disadvantaged backgrounds may suggest, the laboratory, also due to the age of the participants, never had the specific ambition of leading to a real social change (Jarldorn 2019). Instead, the laboratory's primary aim was to represent a moment of gathering and learning, fun and experience, combining the single peculiar experience each of the participants lived as he or she were taking photos at home, on the streets, of theirselves or of their families and friends, discovering photography for themselves with a weekly, collective reflection on each other's body of images as it was in the making.

At the same time, it is important to underline that the participants came from underprivileged families with different migration backgrounds and to reconnect this to the frame in which the laboratory took place. The participants were the children of the families who turn to the organization *Angeli della Città* in order to receive food supplies and clothing, belonging to a class of individuals or families whose income, if existing, in most cases lies under the poverty threshold. And even if this underlying aspect was never discussed with the children themselves, it certainly was a central point in the ideation of the laboratory. As the volunteers of the organization, including myself, were very well aware of due to the frequent contact with these families (primarily with the mothers), one of the problematics affecting children coming from low-income families was the lack of free time activities and creative courses. Our intention, thus, was to create a free creative space for children and teenagers in order to tackle this problem, giving the participants the opportunity to experience creative practices and receive teachings from which in most cases they remain excluded.

In particular in the case of the photography laboratory, the aim was also to introduce them to a new mean of expression and narration through which they could be able to depict their own living environment and give voice to and convoy their feelings.

At the end of the courses, the photos and paintings produced during these moments were printed, framed and exhibited in a Florentine theater gaining the approval of the visitors. The project has since then been re-approved for financing by a different institution, which will give us the opportunity to carry on with courses we started in 2019.

* In order to hide the identity of the participants and their relatives, the selection only shows ambient pictures or pictures in which their identity is hidden.

PHOTO 1: Evening sky from the room of one of the laboratory's participants (1)

PHOTO 2: One of the participants' brother waking down the ladder of their new home

PHOTO 3: The mother and the brother of the photographer as they went out to the park

PHOTO 4: Portrait of the mother of one of the participants
on the sofa (the picture was cropped in order to anonymize the subject)

PHOTO 5: Self-portrait at home

PHOTO 6: Self-portrait on the bed

Photo 7: The kitchen of one of the participants' home

PHOTO 8: Photo of the room the photographer shares with her sister

PHOTO 9: Sunset and tourists at the Piazzale Michelangelo

PHOTO 10: Roses photographed during a group photo tour

PHOTO 11: Evening sky from the room of one of the laboratory's participants (2)

PHOTO 12: Portrait of one of the participants' younger brother

PHOTO 13: Detail of the room of one of the participants

REFERENCES

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