

Anthropology and Art

Jahrgang 17 Heft 1 | 2015

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With unveiled face – what the portrait reveals of myself and
of the others

(‘A visage découvert, ce que le portrait dit de moi et des autres’)

Ethnoscripts 2015 17 (1): 159-167

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

This article describes and depicts the encounter of a group of migrant French language trainees with very different background with the environment of classic paintings in Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Having never been in a museum before, these students have special ways of meeting this environment, of bringing their own cultural references and experiences to this collaborative project. The project photographs each student in front of the chosen work with an object that has been carefully selected both for its connection with the work and with a personal experience. This represents a very emotional moment for the participants: They allow themselves to be photographed and take stage by investing and presenting personally selected works. A dialogue emerges between the art-piece and the personal reality of each participant. The outcome is a triptych of pictures in combination with a statement.

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eISSN: 2199-7942



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With unveiled face – what the portrait reveals of myself and of the others

(*'A visage découvert, ce que le portrait dit de moi et des autres'*)

Florence Aigner *in conversation with Rokia Bamba.*¹

Introduction

In this contribution, I would like to present a participatory photographic project to which I have contributed as a photographer. It was designed for a class of 15 adult students of French as a foreign language from a popular area of Brussels and has been initiated by the centre 'Molenbeek Formation', offering French language classes to migrants in cooperation with the educative programme 'Sesame' from the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. The main objective of this programme is to make the museum's collections more accessible by creating links between the museum's collections and groups of adults learning French, as well as children, youth and families.

The purpose of this participatory approach is to open a space for each participant to stimulate and explore the dimensions of artistic format of a portrait, and to share it with an audience. In that sense, the process is as important as the final product.

The project process

The impulse for this project came from the observation that Brussels is a city where groups of people live separately from each other. They also live in precarious systems (poor education, unemployment, difficulties to integrate beyond their own communities or families). The task was to conceive a project in which they could approach the world of museums through a creative and proactive approach by bringing into it their own cultural references and experiences. The questions that were asked were: Is such a project feasible? And what could it reveal to them, and to us?

Concretely, a group of language students with migration background (French as a foreign language in Brussels) got to know a selection of the collection of portraits from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium. By using cultural practices such as language and photography, each participant got the opportunity to create his own way to perceive the art works and to formulate an individual statement towards one selected work. This was realised through the creation of a memory card game built around a selection of portraits seen in the museum.

1 Project coordinator and French teacher at Molenbeek Formation.

Why portrait?

In this project, portraits are precisely considered beyond exterior features. They express something about social, cultural and religious belongings and emotional attachment. They reveal dreams, ambitions, power or secret emotions. The portrait is often based upon an attribute; an object is investing personal or symbolic functions. The process of identification and projection works between the participants and the paintings.

Thus, from art works rooted in a history, aesthetics, culture, a dialogue ensues between the individuals and the collective; between a subjective view and a reality that is intended objective. All these concrete representations allow experimenting with the complexity of identity construction.

The process has designed to:

- create conditions where two worlds that are not familiar with each other meet with each other's' specificity, by demystifying this place.
- bring people into museum by being active and creatively involved,
- offer the opportunity to explore how culture brings together people, creates links with one's self and the others, within a project and finally also with society as a whole.

The museum represents the gateway allowing this specific link. It is embedded in the urban environment of Brussels, where the participants live. The company of a professional team within the frame of this project helps to overcome barriers between 'low' and 'high culture'.

Once the participants found their mark in the museum, various portraits were analysed together, put back in their social, cultural and historical context. The participants were confronted with other forms of portraits found in different cultures and different artistic expressions. By this proactive practice, their knowledge of the French language has been enriched through the exploration of human emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear.

Finally, the group was invited to bring an object that represents an aspect of their personality. They were stimulated to talk about themselves in relation to that object. Then, for preparing the memory game, they were asked to choose the reproduction of a painting from the museum to which they had a special link, a work that somehow could represent them. They also had to think about an object in the painting that could be staged by them in the photograph.

The photographic approach

Each trainee was then photographed in front of the chosen work with an object that has been carefully selected both for its connection with the work and with a personal experience. This represented a very emotional moment for the participants: They allowed themselves to be photographed and take stage by investing and presenting personally selected works.

Through this very intimate encounter a dialogue emerges between the painting and the personal reality of each participant. Also, a specific way of learning French has been developed by being engaged in a discussion on individual feelings in relation with the analysed paintings.

Furthermore, it also helped to enhance the knowledge and better understanding of the culture of the host country and created a space where past, present and here/ there could resonate.

The memory game – how it works

The result (outcome) is not only for participants, but also shared with other audiences: The purpose of the game is to find and put together three photos of each triptych. It is composed by ten triptychs; each photo is printed on a different sheet. It functions as a game of mirrors between photographic portraits of the participants and the paintings. This memory card game is currently used as an educative tool integrated to the Sesame programme for workshops organized for French classes.

Here is the memory game, together with some words from the participant portrayed in each triptych.



‘Portrait of Willem Moreel, mayor of Bruges’, H. Memling;
photos by Florence Aigner

‘The serene man’ by Abderrahim, 41, from Morocco

“I chose this painting, because it shows a man who looks peaceful and calm. He also seems to have a lot of money. I would love to be as peaceful as this man.”



'Episodes from September Days 1830', G. Wappers;
photos by Florence Aigner

'Léa' by Rokia, 37, from Belgium

"This painting represents the Belgian Revolution of the 27th September 1830. My daughter, Léa, was born on the 27th of September ... and she is my greatest revolution!"



'The Virgin and the Child', Q. Metsys;
photos by Florence Aigner

'The perfect love' by Hakim, 38, from Morocco

"I chose this painting because it brings together two emotions that I love in this life: the emotion of joy and the emotion of love (especially between the mother and her baby). I also like the objects shown in this painting: objects that speak of wealth, the bread which indicates the food given by Mariam to her son to make him live and grow and make others live ... I loved the idea of my photo taken by this painting because I find it good and most able to express what I have in my head and in my heart."



'Portray of A. Anselme and his wife J. Hooftman and their children', Martin De Vos;
photos by Florence Aigner

'The ideal family' by Fatma, 30, from Belgium

"This painting shows us 'an ideal happy family'. I love my family. I miss so much my family that remained in Turkey ... but my son is here and he makes me very happy."



'Triptych of the brotherhood of Saint-Anne', Q. Metsys;
photos by Florence Aigner

'The quiet child' by Abdelaziz, 52, from Morocco

"I chose this painting about praying since praying is very important to me. The child seems very calm. I love children who pray."



'Portrait of Jacqueline Van Coertre', P. P. Rubens;
photos by Florence Aigner

'Old objects' by Zaynab, 27, from Morocco

"I love this painting because it is linked to everything I like: ancient life and beautiful clothes. I love old things and old clothes. I like this woman because she reflects beauty. She is wearing a beautiful dress. I also like to wear beautiful jewellery."



'Portrait of a woman with a bunch of flowers', A.T. Key;
photos by Florence Aigner

'Inner Silence' by Anne from Belgium, project leader

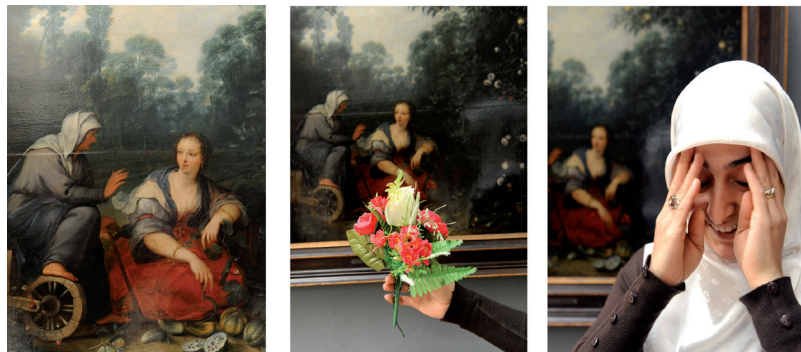
"I love this woman in the silence of her private room. She is surrounded by objects, source of life: flowers in water, fruits and in her crossed hands, she twists a gold rosary."



'Loth and his daughters', A. De Gelder;
photos by Florence Aigner

'Love is in the air' by Manuel, 32 from Spain

"I chose this painting because I would love this to happen to me too ... It represents, for me, a man who seeks true love with a beautiful woman."



'The month of May' – detail of 'The woman with a flower', P. Snijers;
photos by Florence Aigner

'A happy young woman' by Sema, 32, from Turkey

"I chose this painting because I think it represents happiness. I feel happy, too."



'Studies of the head of a Moor', P. P. Rubens;
photos by Florence Aigner

'Memory of the family' by Husniye, 34, Belgian

"I like this picture because it expresses a lot of emotions. Sadness, joy, reflection ... I chose this painting because it explains life. I live far from my family and this is what the portrait expresses as well. I miss my family. I am sad."

A moment of transformation and appropriation

This project has a special meaning for me. Having being involved in various collaborative photographic projects in the past, in which we depart from the personal material culture of each participant, this project is the first project in which a creative space is given to each participant to explore and meet references from cultural and art history of their new country. I had been wondering how the so-called 'low culture' meets the so-called 'high culture'; and even more how to bring them together, how to initiate a creative process in which each participant can become active and inspired.

Taking the photos of the participants at the museum was a moment of intense emotions for me. Beyond being a moment of intense concentration for the participants and myself, I was very touched while they were posing in front of their chosen painting, holding objects, memories, symbols from their personal life embedded in their culture of origin. It created a feeling of accomplishment, a feeling of appropriation, a feeling of their homecoming. Yes, it is possible to create a bridge among people, milieux and cultures. One of the participants said after the project, he bought two entry tickets to the museum for his nephew, because he wanted him to better understand the history and the culture of his new country.

Florence Aigner (1975) is a photographer based in Brussels. With an academic background in Refugee Studies, her artistic practice focuses on issues related to memory, belonging and the material culture of people in exile ('Homes Sweet Home', 'Retour de Babel', 'Coin de vies', ...). Through participatory processes, she has been developing over years participatory projects to give a creative space for self-expression and to initiate collective processes with various social groups through photography, sound creation and writing (workshops in various refugee centres in Belgium and in Palestine, workshops with adolescents in favelas and detention centres in Brazil, Bolivia, ...) She is also member of the collective of audiovisual artists 'Polymorfils' involved in filmmaking and sound creations 'Surya', (2006) 'disorient' (2010), 'The Revelation' (in process).