

'Love Cannot be Framed.' A Visual Art Project during the Pandemic

Wally De Doncker

Independent Author, Belgium

Katerina Dermata

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Greece

Abstract

Distance and communication during the Covid-19 pandemic have been one of the challenges of the last two years worldwide. While traveling was difficult, new technologies and visual stimuli provided opportunities to overcome those obstacles. This paper describes the art project titled Love cannot be framed implemented by Wally De Doncker and Katerina Dermata. While "trapped" in their own countries, the two authors creatively challenged each other during the pandemic. Every week they proposed a theme to each other and took photos from their own living environment in Belgium and Greece. The authors created a synthesis by combining those photos, one Greek and one Belgian for each theme. As a writer, Wally De Doncker interpreted each synthesis with a literary and philosophical methodology and created an artistic album. This art project indicated that distance is only sometimes a barrier to creativity. It is an example of how love bridges a global epidemic.

Keywords: photography, philosophical thinking, interpretation, visual arts

Introduction

In the last two years, humanity experienced a universal threat with enormous emotional, physical, and financial consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic dominated everyday life and practice, challenging people and creating intensive social distancing. However, art allowed people to experience new ways to express their emotions. People overcame this challenge of distance by implementing many visual projects, digital exhibitions, online art courses, and virtual art projects conducted by museums, art academies, and independent artists (Tor, 2021; Tunnikmah, 2021; Bakare, 2020; Hoffman, S.K., 2020).

In this international environment, two lovers creatively challenged each other by implementing a visual game, the starting point of the international visual art project titled "Love Cannot be Framed" (April 2020 - December 2021). The project's inspiration supports the idea that, especially in difficult periods, art can play a key role in bridging the distance imposed by external factors and in expressing love, affection, creativity, and emotions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O9OSwz2KVU>).

Theoretical Approach

According to Roland Barthes (1979), photos incorporate different types and levels of messages. The first level -the denoted message- refers to what is represented in the photo or, in other words, the objective side of photography. The second level -the connoted message- concerns the meaning the photographer adds to the photo or the subjective side of the photo. Later, Barthes (1993) referred to another dimension of the photograph -the punctum- to describe an unexpected and surprising detail in a photo that affects the photographer on a deeper and personal level. In the photographic project "Love cannot be framed," the photographers incorporated all levels of messages as they tried to capture different themes they interpreted.

The starting point of taking photos for this project was always a theme expressed by a word. The photographers wanted to capture photos that represented a specific theme each time. That's why the primary function of the word towards the image in this specific project was the anchorage (Barthes, 1979), which means the theme directed the authors towards a meaning selected in advance. Relay, according to Barthes (1979), is the function in which text and image enrich each other. When pictures were set together in pairs, they inspired Wally De Doncker to interpret them philosophically because the two pictures together

created a new meaning. The philosophical phrases, when added to the pictures, relayed and enriched their meaning on their turn.

The project also implemented the theory of social semiotics. The two creators set a goal to represent their theme via a photograph. To achieve this aim, they made choices about different conceptual levels of a photograph: the theme, the content (what to photograph), the selection (which one of the pictures of each other to choose), the connection and harmony between the photos and the suitable words to better express the meaning from a philosophical point of view. Sign creation is a process in which a signifier (the physical form of a sign) and a signified (the mental representation of a thing and the meaning associated) are set together and create an inseparable unit. Sign creation incorporates choices: what does a sign creator want to communicate, and which is the most appropriate form to use? This procedure for making choices in sign creation applies to the core of social Semiotics (Kress, 2000, Cope & Kalantzi, 2000).

Behind the philosophical interpretation

'I Miss Me'

When Wally De Doncker was a child, he would sometimes look in the mirror at length. Anyone who has tried this can say that gazing at one's reflection for an extended period of time can have a strangely hypnotic effect. One might see oneself as an outsider, as someone else, which allows for reflection upon certain questions: 'If I wasn't here, would I be able to see myself in the mirror?' 'If I hadn't been born, would my mum be here?' 'Would the house where I live be here?' 'Where would my cuddly toy be if I wasn't here?' 'How would my best friend feel without me?'

It was precisely this mirror that provided him with a turning point in his writing career. These questions formed the foundation of his book *Ik Mis Me* ('I Miss Me').

The power of a thought

During his book readings, both children and adults experienced strong reactions. On those occasions, he would ask children one of the questions from the book: 'If I wasn't here, would the walls miss me?' (De Doncker, 2019:25). This question evoked very different answers. Most audience members did not think it possible for walls to miss someone. But there were always a few who thought they could (e.g., 'In castle walls, I can sometimes feel the people who used to live there.'). A young girl once said, very decidedly, 'I know for sure that they can!' De Doncker was amazed by how certain she was. 'What makes you so sure?' 'Well,' she said, 'Last year, my little brother was killed in an accident right here in front of the library. We can still feel him there every day, in every wall of our house!' All the children in the room fell silent.

Beyond this deep emotional response, 'I Miss Me' also inspired many artists. For example, it was also the inspiration for several French theatre plays: "La reine des neiges" (La compagnie du Balcon, 2011, F), "Non, mais t'as vu ma tête" (Compagnie Lucamoros, 2016, F), and "Toi et moi dix doigts" (Dusan Bogdanovic/Roland Dyens/Alberto Ginastera/Julien Malaussen Aurélio, Edler-Copes/Sanaé Ishida/Sophie Grelidé, 2018..., F). In France, the book *Vivre sans moi, je ne peux pas* served as a theme for a number of large exhibitions as well as philosophical workshops for children and adults. Meanwhile, *Us Three (Nous Trois)*, a film trilogy inspired by 'I Miss Me,' depicts the same three girls filmed every six years; their budding identities are given symbolic interpretation over a period of twelve years. The film tells the story of the quest and the preservation of the youthful imagination. Notably, the film 'Us Three / Nous Trois (2019), by Blauwhuis Productions (Ghent), was awarded 'Best Film' at the 'Fic Autor Film Festival' in Mexico 2019 and the Bronze Award at the 'Queen Palm International Film Festival ' 2020 (second quarter) in Florida (USA) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85ui9WiwAio>).

In addition to these French adaptations, the Belgian dance company 'Cacao Bleu' based a performance on the book and the short film 'Zus zonder zus' ('Sis Without a Sis'). In this experimental film, audiences watch children dance and play within a safe cocoon of grass. The girls confront an adult dancer, anticipating and imitating her every move. Throughout the film, the children and the woman exchange roles, impacting their own lives and the lives of others, just like in 'I Miss Me.' A professional theater company created a stage adaptation of the 'I Miss Me' trilogy, which also included 'Clouds in the Sand' (Wolken in het zand) and

'Ahum.'

Starting with 'I Miss Me', De Doncker's philosophical nature began to play a more prominent role. To his surprise, this was appreciated by an ever-increasing number of readers, both in Belgium and abroad. It was a departure from his earlier realistic work, which was met with success. In the beginning, audiences misinterpreted his philosophical motivation. While audiences at first thought he was seeking out philosophical inspiration, he instead is an intrinsically motivated artist, prone to philosophical reflection.

His publisher wanted to make a film version of this book. Together with Jonas Baeckeland, the film's director chose stills from the last movie that could relate to the philosophical thoughts of 'I Miss Me.' This was an interesting process for both: How are stills interpreted as photos? How do we interpret philosophical thoughts? Sometimes they got different perspectives, and we were confronted with surprising angles. In one of the film's stills, the camera focused on a coat hanger without a dress. They started to improvise with the philosophical theme of the book. Would the coat hanger miss the dress? Would the dress miss the girl? He learned that connecting photos and philosophical thoughts could surprisingly enrich his thoughts.

The implementation of the project "Love Cannot be Framed"

The procedure

When COVID-19 overtook the world with quarantines, it sparked a creative response to the authors. They confronted each other with a visual game they could play remotely and online: Katerina Dermata from Athens in Greece and Wally De Doncker from rural Hamme in Belgium.

The authors challenged each other weekly with a theme around which they took pictures. The interpretation of the theme was completely free. The theme was interpreted subjectively. It came down to surprising each other with visual interpretations. The authors happened to stumble upon objects, people, and landscapes embodied by the theme.

At the end of the week, they selected three photos of 'themselves' they wanted to present to each other. They presented this selection to each other and then chose the best photo. The result was two final photos -creating a synthesis- per the theme. The following week a new project with another theme started. The authors maintained this project over several quarantine periods.

This is how a game evolved into a broader project. The authors noted that interpretation was the guideline of the project. Just like in the film version of the book 'I Miss Me,' the photos were interpreted on not one but several levels.

Through conversations, the authors reached a consensus of two images per theme, linking these photos to each other. From this moment grew a philosophical interpretation of Wally De Doncker as a person and author. This philosophical interpretation was then reassessed by others.

The themes

Themes were proposed by both authors alternatively. In total, 52 thematic words were proposed during the project (Figure 1). The themes were:

Balance	Composition	Decay
Blue	Connection	Direction
Borders	Contradiction	Exaggeration
Broken Change	Corners	Faces
Chaos	Creation	Flexibility
	Curiosity	

Flowers		Smell
	Mirroring	
Frame		Sounds
	Motifs	
Freedom		Steam
	New	
Glass		Strange
	Obstacle	
Green		Surprise
	Outside	
Identity		Tenderness
	Perspective	
Insecurity		Together
	Prickles	
Life		Triangle
	Protection	
Light		Two
	Restrictions	
Love		Unexpected
	Shadow	
Mammals		Upside down
	Sky	
Many		Wheels

Some themes were very specific, while others were more abstract. Analyzing the words above, the themes can be classified into different categories:

- *Nature*: words referring to natural elements or the landscape, such as sky, flowers.
- *Colors*: words connected to the chromatic palette, such as green, blue.
- *Numbers*: words representing single or plural numbers or order, such as one, many.
- *Orientation*: words connected to a location, place, shape, or movement, such as an upside-down corner, triangle.
- *Quality*: words describing a condition or change, such as new, broken.
- *Abstract themes*: words expressing ideas or concepts, such as freedom, love, curiosity.

Figure 1.

The panorama of the themes created in word clouds program © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata



Photographing

There were many challenges during the project that arose at different stages. The first was choosing the theme. The second was deciding what to photograph, a choice each participant needed to make individually. New technologies, such as mobile phones, make photography easier, faster, and cheaper than analog cameras, and the participants used them for taking pictures.

The core of the project was a slow-looking process like that proposed by Shari Tishman (2017), connected with patient looking to create meaning and think critically, despite the speed of contemporary information. Thinking of a word, each participant had the opportunity to explore their environment -house, neighborhood, workplace, etc.- and look closer at visual stimuli that may not be noticeable in everyday life. Through this process, they could better picture their theme, literally or metaphorically. The credits for all photos are to the authors.

Choosing the photos

After photographing, each participant chose three photos to present to the other. Participants commented on each other's photos and their connection to the theme. After discussion, they chose two photos -one of each other- to create the final visual composition.

Interpreting the photos

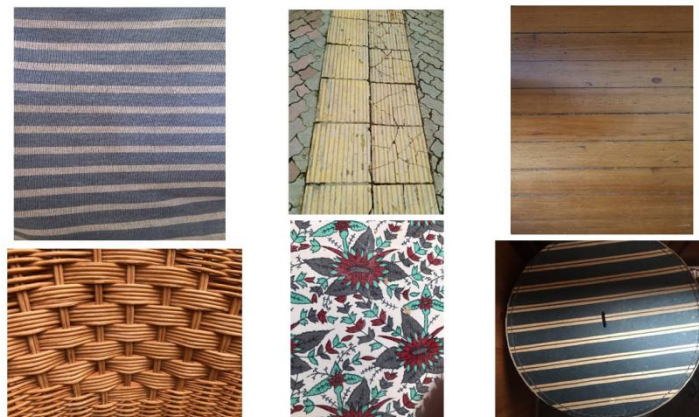
The interpretation of the photos consisted of two levels, the interpretation of the visual elements and the philosophical thoughts. The first interpretation, visual elements, prompted participants to look for colors, lines, depicted objects, landscapes, and visual angles under the lens of each theme. In addition, participants interpreted each synthesis under a philosophical aspect that revealed not only the visible but implied levels of meaning, connecting the visual elements to another level. Characteristic examples are provided.

Motifs

A motif is a purely visual element that follows a repetitive structure. Patterns and motifs are everywhere: nature, mathematics, art, etc. The choices participants captured were many. Six photos captured the theme: lines, patterns on clothes, paths, and designs on different products (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

All the photos for the theme "motifs" before choosing the final two. © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata



The photo with the path for people who are visually impaired (the middle photo in the first row) was chosen out of the three because the pattern of the yellow tiles is also functional. The photo with the storage box (the last photo in the second row) was also chosen because a clear linear pattern is interrupted by a small hole. It may also contain a secret: What's in it? So, the authors selected those two photos to create the synthesis (Figure 3) because they move beyond the theme to refer to the function of the path or the box.

The first photo of the synthesis of the theme motifs shows a storage box with horizontal motifs. The second

photo shows a footpath for people who are visually impaired located in Athens. The tiles on the right side of the path are broken. The path runs vertically in the photo. Visually the two photos are connected through the linear motif. Curiosity connects the two images. Where does the path lead? What does the box contain?

So: Even those who are blind will remain curious.

Figure 3.

Motifs © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata

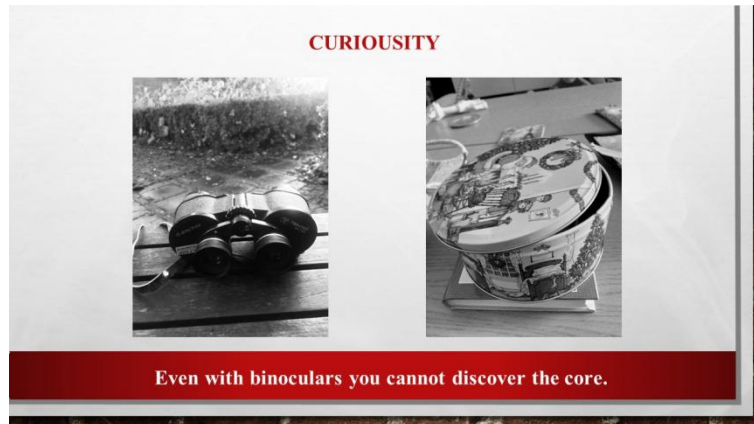


Curiosity

The first theme of the project was “curiosity,” which represented the playful spirit of the visual game. As the photos were positioned together to form a visual composition, the authors discovered that various people interpreted and visualized the same theme differently. Curiosity, in one photo, was depicted as a long, distant glance through binoculars, while in the other, it was interpreted as a close and secret discovery (Figure 4).

Wally De Doncker connected the two photos philosophically. The function of binoculars is to search for objects, animals, and movements from afar. After its primary function as a cookie box, for example, a tin box may later be used to store all kinds of small items: needles, thumbtacks, photos, pictures, candies, even cash. The stranger who opens the box is often curious about what is inside. The connection between the two functions is searching for the core: for the binoculars that can see a far distance or for the box to find what is in it. Philosophically, it can be interpreted as searching for the core -- a core that is often symbolically not found.

De Doncker was inspired by the philosophical connection between the two photos, which led to reflections such as people searching for the core of their existence. Often, they don't find it, even though they try very hard and in every possible way. Even searching with binoculars in a box doesn't help. In far distances (in the universe), there is an infinity, an endlessness, and the further one goes, the more one discovers. The same phenomenon occurs with tiny things. For example, a microscope can discover molecules, atoms, protons, photons, etc. The endlessness does not help to find the ultimate nucleus—the core.

Figure 4.*Curiosity* © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata**Change**

The theme “change” was another example of how personal interpretation played a key role in how people viewed the world. The first photo shows broken reading glasses, while the second photo shows a bunch of green celery wilting (figure 5). The connection between the pictures leads to finite things. The broken reading glasses are not functional anymore. The wilted celery can no longer be served but is destined for the compost heap. The depravity of both objects is the leading theme of the change.

De Doncker linked broken reading glasses to the transience of nature. Because time is relative, a year feels like a long time. When something has been in one’s life for several years, that person feels it will always be there. This inevitable process of time is often ignored. The insight that nothing lasts forever and nothing is permanent is communicated through the symbolism of the glasses. Often this insight is painful and hard to accept.

So: ‘Depravity sometimes leads to difficult insights.’

Figure 5.*Change* © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata**Corner**

During the implementation of the project, participants noticed the effort it took to detect a suitable photo to capture the theme. This challenge, however, revealed unexpected visual details and contradictions. For example, “Corner” is a strong connecting edge between two lines crossing to a point. In the following composition (Figure 6), the first photo shows a footpath in Athens that turns into a curve instead of a corner.

The second photo depicts a male figure in the corner of a contemporary art museum. A street corner may be round and gentle in contrast to a wall's sharp and strict corner, which may restrict one's visual horizon.

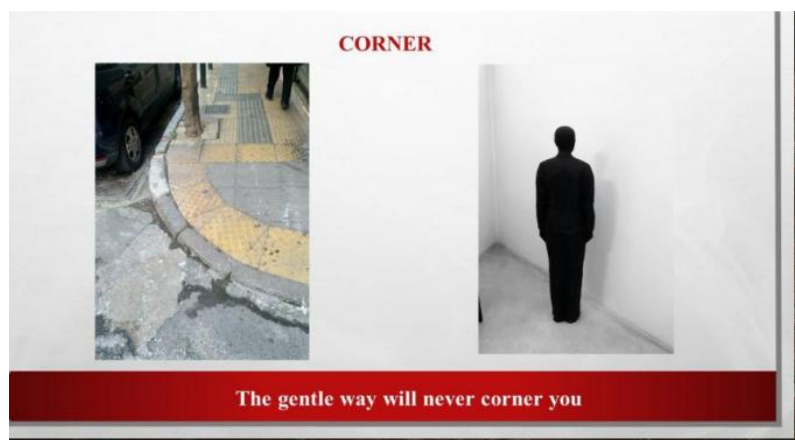
In this synthesis, a black figure depicted in both photos -not intentionally- provides an extra visual connection between the two photos, as if the figure in the upper right corner of one photo stepped into the second one and stood at the corner. Visually, the two photos express different ideas: the "round corner" on the left provides an idea of movement when one turns into something new, walks away from something, or takes a new path in life, while the figure standing at the corner on the right photo has been "trapped" into a corner, facing an obstacle.

Both pictures can be interpreted philosophically. Whoever follows a path can avoid corners. A walker might be hindered by a tree in the path, but they will step to the side without colliding. Whoever avoids the curves and chooses the corners will be cornered and stuck at a particular moment. However, if one follows the curves, one can continue on their life path. Some people avoid corners and obstacles. They often fall into a routine. Others, on the other hand, are confronted with a life path with corners and obstacles. Sometimes they come out stronger; life experience makes them stronger. Sometimes they are forced into an awkward, embarrassing, or inescapable position. Viewers can interpret it differently: How do I interpret my life path? What do I prefer? Do I have choices?

So: The gentle way will never corner you.

Figure 6.

Corner © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata



Mirroring

Some themes incorporated by default a visual character and referred directly to the sense of sight. A characteristic example was the theme "mirroring," which connects an image with its reflection, creating symmetrical elements in each photo. An image is seen through a mirror, creating playful photos, a visual game in the visual game, as the viewer takes a closer look to read the images.

In the photo on the right (figure 7), water works as the material in which the trees and natural environment are reflected. However, it is unclear which is the image, and which is the reflection. In reality, the photo illustrates the reflection of the inside of the room to the outside. The viewer must discover which part of the photo is real and which is the reflection.

Figure 7.

Mirroring © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata

Plato's allegory of the cave (Eyer, 2009) closely observes this theme. What is the reality: the shadows of the prisoners on the cave's walls, or is it the prisoners themselves? What is the reality of the photos we have taken? Is this the image of the reflection in the water? Or is it the image of the trees next to the river? In the second picture, it is unclear what the reality is: Is it an open window that reflects the outside world in a mix with the reflection inside? If we are trying to indicate reality here, it would not be possible because a photo is only a picture of reality.

Therefore: Imitation is close to reality, but it is not.

Smell

Some themes were connected to elements beyond the visual. For example, how can one capture something invisible, such as a smell (figure 8)? This theme was a challenge because how can you capture a scent in a photo? The first photo shows the front of a Dior perfume box. The second photo depicts cloves of garlic. Both photos refer to sharp-smelling products, but an underlying theme still remains. Like all perfumes, Dior is a seduction product, a mixture of various fragrances in a solvent. A brand name - a word in this case- implies the sense of smell in the viewer's mind. Garlic, with its characteristic smell - that not everybody likes- is also often used for good blood circulation and has been described as an aphrodisiac since ancient times. This philosophical link led to the following:

Even hidden scents follow the path to passion.

Figure 8.

Smell © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata

**Freedom**

Themes as abstract words were the most challenging and, at the same time, provided a variety of personal choices and interpretations. The first photo depicts a cityscape of Athens behind a locked gate. One cannot travel there freely without opening the gate or possibly climbing over it. Freedom is therefore blocked behind bars. Freedom in this photo is a state to be achieved once the obstacles are deleted or overcome. Visually, the bars going vertically through the photo and the choice of the visual angle - from the bottom up, *contre plongée*- provide an intense feeling of being trapped while the depth of the sky supports the lack of freedom. The photo conjures a prison from the outside: gigantic walls, bars, and sometimes even barbed wire, and the feeling of being deprived of physical freedom. Meanwhile, the second photo is of a cat that won't let anything get in the way. Freedom is understood as having the ability to act without constraint or possessing the power and resources to fulfill one's purposes unhindered. Suppose there were no obstacles, which is, of course, a utopia. Does freedom exist in a world without walls, barriers, and bars?

Hence this philosophical statement: "Without bars and obstacles, freedom is non-existent."

Figure 9.

Freedom © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata



Life

At the core of this visual art project were pleasure and joy. These elements are at the core of life. In the first picture of the synthesis (Figure 10), one can see children playing, climbing a tree, and enjoying games. The age of children as the new generation and the activity -playing- imply that life continues. The second photo is a traditional Greek appetizer with wine and sweets. Life is implied via the depicted objects as a celebration: tasteful, sweet, and enjoyable situations where people come together.

Life is not always sunshine and rainbows. People must overcome obstacles during their lifetimes to move forward. When they have overcome them, they often come out stronger. Through play, children learn how to deal with and overcome obstacles. Life is most celebrated when obstacles like illness, accidents, and financial setbacks are overcome. Often with tasty food and drink.

Life is most celebrated after obstacles have been overcome.

Figure 10.*Life* © Wally De Doncker & Katerina Dermata**Conclusions**

The visual art project “Love Cannot be Framed” occurred during the Covid -19 pandemic (April 2020 - December 2021) as a game between two distant lovers living apart in Greece and Belgium. In a time of social isolation, this project became a way to span the distance between the participants, as art always finds a way to connect people.

The main characteristics of the project were personal choices and interpretation, which evolved into several areas:

- The themes were spontaneous choices of the participants, with no restrictions. Sometimes one theme inspired the next one, while other times, themes led in other directions. Every theme was a personal choice, which the other participants had to follow.
- Situations that eventually lead to taking different pictures. The different landscapes the participants lived in -urban environment and countryside- provided different photographic choices. Moreover, culturally determined elements of Belgian and Greek culture are represented in both photos, such as historical monuments, habits, and food elements.
- Subjective criteria to determine the final photograph. Each participant chose three photos to present, a matter of personal interpretation. “Which of my photos represents my theme better? Which choices do I make, and which do I choose to leave out of the selection?”
- Subjective criteria to determine the other photographer's final selection. The final choice was made based on personal criteria such as the photographic result (e.g., is it a good photo?) and the connection, apparent or implied, with the theme (e.g., does the photo represent the theme properly?). In some cases, we did not fully agree on the final two photos, which underlines that we have different subjective criteria.
- The link between both pictures leads to a philosophical interpretation. Each photo is a unit expressing the perspective of its photographer. When photos were compiled into pairs, they created a new unit, which embodies the individual meaning of each photo but also creates a new meaning as the two photos are seen in a composition. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), the composition is how a picture's representative and interactive elements interact, proposing a way to see them as joined or separate. The authors intentionally created pairs directing the eyes of the viewer to observe the photos in connection, inspiring philosophical reflection.
- Philosophical thought is interpreted by a wider audience. This thought first incorporates the personal interpretation of the creator. At the same time, everyone can interpret a stimulus on a

different level. Therefore, reflection is always multidimensional and open to personal interpretations. The authors tested this with an international audience of experts during the 54th IVLA Congress in Jyvaskyla, Finland.

In the future, this visual art project will be presented in exhibitions in Belgium and Greece (in progress). An idea would be the creation of a virtual gallery accessible online for photo education guided by a manual. This material could challenge students to experiment with themes, images, and philosophical interpretations as in the project.

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