



## Advertising identities: virtual galleries as places of identity

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### Abstract

*This paper is focused on the public presentation of self through virtual art galleries, singling out the field of photography. Photography has always been disputed as being part of the highbrow arts because of its popular character. Today, anyone who owns a photo camera can experience photography as art, without a rigorous training. Everybody is able to expose the photos freely to a large number of people, on the Internet. Consequently, the Internet opens up a virtual space, in which photo artists and amateurs can promote their works and exhibit them in a personal online gallery, which represents their place in the virtual vastness. Therefore, my research approaches the matter of the virtual gallery as an identity place, being focused on finding out why artists choose to exhibit in virtual galleries. I asked myself what are the new functions of the virtual art galleries? Are they understood as online markers that distinguish the owners in these virtual environments? In other words, are these personal galleries a way of expressing online identities?*

### Keywords

Online identity, virtual gallery, identity place, virtual self, online identity construction

### Theoretical aspects: What is identity?

This research is a thoroughgoing study on one of my Bachelor Thesis' chapters, which is related to identity construction on the Internet and to what I would call "the gallery is the online avatar"<sup>2</sup>; moreover, it is the online identity that the photographer could not express it in the offline reality, being based on inner feelings and states of mind which one believes that it can be only communicated through artistic creations, such as their photographs. The way in which the photographers relate to their photographs exhibited

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in the gallery, how they perceive their personal webpage and why they continue to expose themselves through photographs on the internet are important criteria in defining their personal gallery as an identitary place. Before explaining why I used the term “identitary”, it is important to emphasize that one of the ideas on which is based this research refers to post-modernity as generating changes, with the informatization of society and with the virtualization process of social life. These changes are translated through the processes<sup>3</sup> of re-timing and re-spacing, that is to say, space and time coordinates become immobile, but only the physical movement is abolished because geographical and social spaces are opened, and society is confronted with an „intoxication of time and space” (Nowotny, 1994). This means an increase in speed, mediated and rushed by technology.

In this context, the postmodern self is confronted with a crisis defined by an eager need of inclusion: the individual aspires to obtain from others the recognition of his/her value, to be accepted in a reference group, based on a quality which distinguishes him/her from others, that helps making himself/herself conspicuous. The Internet is considered a product of postmodernism (Agger, 2004; Hutcheon, 2002; Kellner, 1995; Poster, 2001), where the self becomes an object, a topic, as Agger (2004) argued, where people become results for their own production and their own marketing. If the modern self has a ground of values, a personality and an identity, the postmodern one abandons this ground and becomes produced and commercialized. As the self is being perceived as lacking of identity (“Postmodernity is based on a self-consciousness alienation, which becomes a consideration and a manipulation” - Agger, 2004: 115), individuals tend to live with the uncertainty of the right choice: they do not know anymore if they chose their true identity or if they constructed an identity in the end (Kellner, 1995). In addition, Frederic Jameson sees in postmodernism a period of self-fragmentation, in this way the self becomes multiple, decentred and what remains is the anxiety of an identity (cited in Turkle, 1995: 49). From Turkle’s perspective, people use computers to search for new experiences which will change their way of thinking, and less as an instrument to accomplish a duty: “The Internet has become a significant social laboratory to experiment the construction and re-construction of our postmodern self that is why in virtual reality we create and fashion our self” (ibid., 1995: 180). The cyberspace becomes reflexive, oriented to self-consciousness, where “you are what pretend that you are”, so Turkle perceives this online self as being multiple, transitory and in a continuous development. This is what Kenneth Gergen (1991) describes by “multiphrenia”, an experience through which our identities are defined and shaped by many possibilities of expressing our self. As a result, Turkle (1995) considers that in computer-mediated communication, the individual self is fluid and multiple, is the subject of multiphrenia and not a static and singular one (“In computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language” - p.15). Another point of view belongs to Mark Poster (2001) who understands

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<sup>3</sup> David Harvey in „The Condition of Postmodernity” refers to a process of „time-space compression”, in other words, if the modernity has solidified time, in postmodernity, space is re-temporalized.

the identity as being constructed online and not a pre-determined essence which we bring along when we enter on the Internet. So, as Turkle would argue, when we enter online we are given the chance to experience different roles and we tend to engage in role play games as we experiment an identity which we can not portray in physical life. A benefit of this experience would be that individuals gain a new perspective of the world and of their place in it.

Lury (1998) considers that in democratic societies, the idea of a “possessive individualism” has crystallized, according to which the free, determinant and responsible identity is constituted as a property. In addition, individuals search the power to recognize themselves and to have the capacity of seeing their self as an object, which they can use efficiently in their actions. The terms of this possession are renegotiated in a process of experimentation which can be translated through different practices based on the purpose of self-knowledge. The anxiety of being recognized as a free, autonomous and responsible person, determines individuals to find new forms of acceptance and recognition on the Internet, for instance, photography and experiencing the status of a pseudo-artist, who is waiting for the confirmation of self-value.

So, “identity” defines a reflexive place where the self multiplies and permits the creation of an online identity through computer mediated communication, the place where an identity is formed and sustained through an online facework, in the Goffmanian sense<sup>4</sup>, developed through the interactions inside the gallery: giving and receiving feedback, following other’s galleries, participating in contests, acquiring a membership in different online groups.

### **Some methodological aspects**

It appears that on the Internet, the artists can exhibit and can make public more works of art than in a physical gallery, as they can make themselves seen and heard more rapidly than in an offline gallery. As well as the physical galleries, virtual art galleries become a “vehicle of publicity” but on the Internet. But in this study I will take into consideration the new meanings acquired by the virtual art gallery as a consequence of its online existence. My main purpose is to find out if the gallery becomes a vehicle of advertising identities, through which individuals can perceive themselves as artists. I am also interested in finding out if the online gallery allows the construction of an online artistic identity through the exhibition of photographs and the personalization of the profile page.

My research is based on 13 intensive interviews, semi-structured, with amateurs and professionals, men and women between 18 and 58 years old, from art photography and on the content analysis of the visual material in their personal galleries (from Caedes.net, DeviantArt.com or personal websites). Heinich (2004) claimed that defining an artist supposes delimiting a hierarchically-marked double frontier: on the one hand, the

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<sup>4</sup> Goffman (2007) sees the self as an interaction process in which there are created many selves depending on every performance.

frontier between major and minor arts, and, on the other hand, the frontier between professional and amateurs. So, in my research, I tried to distinguish between a professional photographer and an amateur on the base of some criterions<sup>5</sup>: the first one would be the academic studies or a degree in photography, like a Bachelor, Master or a PhD; secondly, I took in consideration the experience: projects, workshops, awards, prizes, collaborations, varnishing or public exhibitions. The third criterion would be the technical means: a professional camera, gadgets and other professional devices. In the fourth place, I chose the number of photographs' sales or the existence of a demand from clients, which would emphasize a note of professionalism. Some of these characteristics appear also in Finney's (1993) research, like: art education, jury acceptance and sales, but I considered only four criterions notably to take into account, in my research, for the distinction between professional and amateur. I have mentioned this aspect because I believe that this distinction between amateurs and professionals is significant when I try to understand how these people perceive the virtual exhibitions and how they discovered in the Internet a mean to promote their photographs.

In what concern my respondents, I have to state that I knew 5 of them before taking the interviews, then they helped me and recommended 3 of their acquaintances and the rest of 5, I've chosen myself randomly from their friends' section. What I would like to make clear is that 2 professionals indicated me 2 amateurs with whom to discuss, and one amateur indicated for me a professional. Doing research in the online field appeared at the beginning as having many methodological problems because of many limits that the cyberspace imposes. For instance, the anonymity and the pseudonymity complicate the identity issue, as Jacobson (1999) agrees, the name, gender, and other characteristics of a participant's digital persona may be completely unrelated to the individual's offline identity. As a result, I choose as respondents 5 acquaintances who indicated me 3 respondents, and with them I conducted face-to-face interviews, so I had the chance to meet the persons behind the pseudonym. During the interview I tried to conceptualize this "offline identity" through questions related to photography as their practice domain: their tastes (what they like to photograph) or how they describe themselves as photographers (amateur, professional, hobby-ist, "weekend photographer"), what represents photography for them? First, I tried to conceptualize what significance has photography in offline reality, and then, I asked them to tell me more about their virtual gallery: why they chose to exhibit on the Internet, if they are fond of the entire community that exhibit in the same space<sup>6</sup> and I also asked them to

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<sup>5</sup> Finney (1993: 404) identifies several key characteristics which determine the general artist reputation or art world standing: „The most important were formal art education (for instance, a master degree), jury and gallery acceptance ( for example, one person exhibitions), "circle" centrality (centrality is a mediating process, partly a consequence of previous recognition, partly a means of future recognition), sales, artistic style and professionalism". He argues that these six factors were the most influential in defining an artist's location in one of the five artist strata in the local scene of his research, and they are the main focus of analysis to follow: naives, hobbyists, serious amateurs, pre-professionals, and professionals.

<sup>6</sup> I have to make clear that when I talk about the virtual gallery I refer in the first place to the personal page that an user has on a website, it represent his place at a certain online address; taking for example Deviant

describe their personal gallery, how they put them in order, how they choose what it is to be post and what represent their photographs and their gallery for them as online users.

The random respondents were interviewed online: via email and via Yahoo Messenger, one of the main reasons was the distance because all of them were from other towns. What I observed was an outstanding difference in answers between those received in emails and those from Messenger. If via Yahoo Messenger I had a little control over the discussion, I could emphasize a theme more than others by introducing phrases like “could you describe me a little more”, “why do you think so”, via email the lack of interaction was obvious because I had many short responses and I could not obtain many details in my themes of interest, so this was a major limit for my research. But I had only two interviews via email, so my work was not too compromised because of the poor answers.

In what concerns the analysis of the visual material, I have entered in my respondents’ galleries and I observed the main characteristics from my analysis guide: what is reiterative in photographs (themes, colours, angles, names)? What genre of photographs they submitted (self-portraits, portraits, nature, fantasy etc)? How they have named their gallery and every single photograph? What they have commented under their photographs or how they have answered to others feedback?

### **Photography is going online: between highbrow and lowbrow art**

In my research, I focused on the problem of art in the digital era and its exposure on the Internet, through virtual art galleries. Because the virtual art galleries are defined by a diversity of domains from artistic sphere, I concentrated only on the photographic domain.

One of the main purposes for this “cutting up” is related to the legitimacy of this artistic domain, always debated and contested as being part of the highbrow arts because, at first, the camera was a vehicle of mimicking rather than creating art.

In addition, Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 95-98) considered photography a “middle-brow art”, and placed it, near jazz, cinema and chanson, in the “sphere of the legitimizable”, where the authorities of legitimacy compete and claim legitimacy. But, at the moment of his research, he understood a different degree of cultural legitimacy in practicing photography because of the absence of institutions, as academies or universities, where photography could be taught as art. The fact that this form of art was accessible to a large number of untrained people was a significant reason for critics to position photography between the lowbrow arts. That is why, in that time, photography remained at the status of popular art, because individuals did not need a rigorous training or a university degree, but they were able to experience it as simple consumers. But if we rethink this legitimacy principle in today’s context, the major change is referring to the institutionalization of photography as art, in universities or museums for example,

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Art, it is a space on the Internet which hosts millions of personal galleries, so when I talk about community I mean all these personal pages united and all the members/users that interact through their daily activity.

but in the same time it can be experienced as a hobby by amateurs. For instance, in spite of the existing institutions “to teach them methodically and systematically as constituent parts of legitimate culture” (Bourdieu, 1990: 96), everyone who buys a photo camera is able to experience photography as hobby or art, without an “institutional training”. Moreover, is able to expose it to a large number of people, on the Internet, which brings an interesting phenomenon: an online community shaped by a diversity of photographers, from amateurs to professionals, who share opinions and give advice in the improving of skills and techniques in photography.

I consider that this distinction between highbrow and lowbrow is important when I take into account the photography exhibited on the Internet. Many photographs in these galleries are submitted by amateurs and at first impression it would appear that these works are mass-produced and they lack of originality. But the status of these works has to be judge through their new function of expressing photographic qualities (uncommon themes, attractive ideas, and beautiful angles) and bringing appreciative critiques; moreover, the function of expressing an online artistic identity which is maintained by these works from the virtual gallery. At this point I have to clarify further this idea through explaining my second reason of choosing photography as a research field on the Internet.

### **The Exhibition and the Online Mediation of Artistic Identities**

Another purpose of focusing on the sphere of photography is related to the transformations and the new functions which photography is acquiring in the digital age together with the development of technologies of art. Patrick Maynard (1991) in a paper entitled “Photo-opportunity: Photography as Technology”, describes technology as amplifying our powers in terms of locomotion, communication, production etc, and he defines digital photography as an artistic resource developed by the new technologies which intensify our power to describe and detect. Technology is not defined only by using and developing new instruments, but also by allowing people to fashion in new ways their environments and to create the basis of new ways of thinking.

Nevertheless, the Internet has facilitated the development of new and various forms of virtual collectivity and spaces dedicated to responsive forms, as forums, blogs, virtual communities, virtual galleries, which have opened new directions in articulating time and space. David Z. Saltz (1997) brings in the concept of “interactive technology”<sup>7</sup>, with reference to digital works of art from the virtual world. The Internet facilitates the emergence of new spatial and temporal dimensions, such as “forms of collective social conscience” (Lovejoy, 2004: 239), in which the individual self appears transfigured with the creation of a virtual identity<sup>8</sup>. One of these forms of collective social conscience is the

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<sup>7</sup> “Interactive computer art is a form of conceptual art, and indeed that it represents the culmination of the movement in twentieth-century art history toward what Lucy Lippard famously described as the <dematerialization of art>” – Saltz, 1997: 117

<sup>8</sup> “Virtual environments allow individuals to dramatically alter their self-representation”- Yee, Bailenson, Ducheneaut, 2009: 285

online art gallery. An online gallery of photographic art is a virtual space which offers the artist a place, his „there” inside the gallery and it is consisted of an URL address, a „homepage”. In this way, Silver (1997) argues that personal Web sites serve no other purpose than communication with known and unknown others.

Through this personal homepage, artists can create their own gallery, are free to have a constant public and a group of friends which visit their works, comment upon them, without a busy net of mediators which can make the public exhibition of their works difficult.

The gallery also offers them the possibility of creating an “avatar”, namely a user profile, giving the freedom of “privacy” or intimacy in their space. That is to say, their gallery becomes an identitary place, private, because the photographs depict some of them personality or real identity (“This is because the virtual space can seem like a space of separation and therefore escape from everyday offline social relations” – Valentine and Holloway, 2002: 316); and public, because of the Internet’s main feature, the global character which produces different types of public spaces, open forums for the dissemination of information, ideas, opinions that are frequented by strangers. For instance, S8 recognizes that “all her works are strictly personal” and, in the same time, the gallery is way of making her art public, “it is an open book of my feelings”, and she exhibit from a need of finding out how others perceive her works. On the other hand, S11 affirms that:

It’s much easier and accessible to post works in a virtual gallery, for you, as well as for visitors. Because we live in the age of speed, the information circulates more rapidly in the virtual environment; this is the major advantage of a virtual gallery – you have the possibility of being watched by people from all over the world.

One of the Internet’s attractions is that individuals can reveal, on their homepage, the real identity and the contact data, or they are free to remain anonymous, by shaping a virtual identity (maybe, under a pseudonym, pretending to be someone else). The Internet offers the freedom of controlling many aspects of our identity relating to a public. When people go online, they have a certain control over their identity: they can take different names, descriptions about their persons, so they take conscious decisions about how they want to be perceived by others.

In the case of my respondents, the majority have a pseudonym, which represents the name of their gallery. For example, S10 is “TheQuietSnow: The Lady of the Snow”, S8 is “Khymikaze: Becoming myself” or S9 is “Thrudr: Lamia”. Others have a nickname/pseudonym but under it they have revealed their real name: it is the case of S2 or S11<sup>9</sup>.

D. Chandler has carried out a study on the problem of homepages, “Personal home pages and the construction of identities on the web”, and he discovered that when people construct online homepages, they do not perceive them as simply personal websites, but these reflect the construction of their own identities. On these pages there

<sup>9</sup> <http://unda.deviantart.com/gallery/> , <http://chocollat.deviantart.com/gallery/>

is a “guestbook” conceived as a comment section, where visitors can leave comments and their first impressions about the artworks. Digital identity construction makes possible to express latent and nested identities or to more fully disclose aspects of the self that are difficult to represent physically (cited in Silver, 1997).

Taking into consideration the postmodern self-crisis, with that need of inclusion and recognition and also the multiple engaging features of the Internet, it appears to me that photography becomes a practice with resources in this sense (“this practice of photography represents a great potential of power: the power of conserving someone’s condition, of creating alternative representations and arguments for producing more than images of consumption” - Bentkowska-Kafel, 2005:160). But what happens in the researched virtual galleries? As Burnett (2004) argues, the interaction between real and virtual and the way in which they form a continuum, reflects the fact that the western culture has changed its conception regarding images as representations to images as domination, visualization and control. In postmodernism it is believed that cultural producers cannot innovate because of a crisis of representation as Jameson (1984) defined it, that is why in a world of simulacra and images it is difficult to distinguish authenticity from reality, moreover, there is also debated a crisis of creativity (cited in Fowler, 1997). Exhibiting a photograph means transmitting a message, so in the case of representation the sense of communication is singular from photographer to watcher, meanwhile the process of visualization impose a two-way relation: the watcher is receiving the message and also he is interpreting it, in other words, the feedback makes a difference. As long as the creative production is no more sustained only by representation but also by visualization, the photographer intends to receive a feedback through the process of visualization, which refers to the relation between images and human creativity and interpretation (Burnett, 2004). Photographs not only represent more than information, namely they detach from their biographical and social function of portraying and are not anymore only the reflection of the world, but they become an instrument of persuasion, such as photographs in advertising. I have to make clear that it is not about domination but this persuasion is understood through the fact that they construct an identity of online artist and they submit their best photographs in order that visitors will recognize and support this new identity created online which is a facework, constructed through their pseudonym, comments on photos and their gallery.

Moreover, the virtual galleries imply a “visual rhetoric” (Scott, 1994) but what is specific in this case is the advertised product, namely the identity of the online photographer. In this sense, photographers choose to post in their gallery their most appreciated works that would make their gallery the most attractive to be visualized by a large number of users; for instance, on DeviantArt, they are awarded with a popularity title for the most visited gallery of the month and this “distinction” means fame, more friends, more commentaries. For example, S8 affirms that she posts only the photographs which she considers that have a tint of ambiguity related to herself and which are illustrated with a high quality technique. In the same manner, S10 claims that she posts only the photographs that she likes most and she thinks are meant to be highly



appreciated: “When I am taking a photograph I try to illustrate something out of the common”.

But the gallery represents their online identity, so appreciating their photographs also means the recognition of their qualities as photographers. Many of my respondents affirmed that the received feedback on their photographs, mostly the positive type, for instance, comments of appreciation, functions as a stimulus of going further and has effect on their self-esteem. I tend to believe that the virtual criticism, translated in comments of photographs, is understood as a public existence of the individual as an artist or as being visible as a future artist. This is what I might call by “You are commented, then you are public; you are public, then you exist”. Nevertheless, the feedback is perceived as a liaison element in the relationship between individual and online public, more precisely, that users imagine their exposures of photographs as a process of communication, mediated by the gallery. So, posting a photograph means that you want to say something, you want to be heard and also you want a response: “(the gallery) is a space where I can see others’ photographs and I can receive critiques” – S10; „ it’s a place where you are commented upon and you can receive critiques...it’s very important (the online feedback) because I consider that without it I cannot evolve as an artist” – S12.

Barthes argues that photography has contributed to developing a self-identity constituted by a continuous and repetitive des-internalization of subjectivity and a simultaneous affirmation of new forms of intimacy, affection and self-representation (cited in Lury, 1998: 80). José van Dijck (2008) describes the new functions of photography in the digital era: taking photos is not anymore a primary act of memory with the social function of portraying the family moments, but it has become an instrument of forming and communicating individual identity. For instance, S3 believes that “photography is an inner laboratory, if you are interested I open the door for you anytime”, it is something special inside you that grows, “an inner circle where the feelings are very intense”. In the same manner, S10 affirms that “the exhibited photographs are a special way of communicating my feelings”. So, despite serving the purpose of being an instrument of memory, the digital camera is seen today as an instrument of identity construction, with a greater power of shaping autobiographical memories.

Through my creations I express my feelings, states of mind and some significant moments of my life. Every work is a puzzle piece; the puzzle is my interior life, the whole line of events that formed me as personality/character, as a human being. It’s in the same time a catharsis process and a chance to experiment new techniques of illustrating my inner life (S8).

An American study focused on teenager groups between 14 and 19 years old, brought out a disparity between what the majority valued in photography and how they behave: most of them describe photos as permanent recordings of their lives, meanwhile

their behaviour points out a preference for photography as a form of social communication (Schiano et al., 2002, apud van Dijck, 2008). The individuals articulate their identity as social beings through preserving photographs with the purpose of documenting their life but also through participating at photo-exchanges which mark their identity as interactive producers and cultural consumers.

Digital photography is part of the great transformation in which the self becomes the centre of a virtual universe constituted by spatial and informational waves. Some scholars consider that personal photographs are the equivalent of identities: “we are our photographs” (apud van Dick, 2008), that is to say they reflect the artist’s personality and represent the photographer’s offline identity. As Schau and Gilly (2003) would put it, in the world of personal Web space, we are what we post. Laura Robinson (2007) believes that the online self is negotiated and it is shaped in the same manner as the offline one. She considers that users do not intend to transcend the fundamental aspects of the offline self but they rather tend to bring the same categories used in the offline reality to their online created identities. So, the online self appears as an extension of the offline one. What I observed in all the virtual galleries of my subjects is the “IDs section”, a section with self-portraits and photographs that depicts the visible/recognizable part of the real identity. It appears to me that this section is the only visible connection with the offline identity, which enables the continuum between the “virtual” and the “real”. Laura Robinson (2007) argues that the symbolic interactionism helps us understand the creation of the virtual “I” and “me”, more precisely, the main argument is that the social interaction perceives the self through its interactions in social life, so the self is not railed but incorporated and constantly negotiated. As long as users do not intend to go beyond the aspects of their offline self, it can be affirmed that the cyberself is created in the same manner as the offline one. This means that there is no discontinuity between the two worlds, as Robinson (2007) was arguing, the online identity appears as an extension of the offline one, but I would add that the online construct is coming with something visible only in the photo-creations: the inner features of the photographer. When I asked what means for them the photographs exposed in the online galleries, the majority of my respondents tended to speak about feelings, states of mind and experiences that they could express better through photographs. Thus, these statements lead me to a possible interpretation of this determination of online exhibition, that the virtual gallery offers them a near to hand mean of expressing these inner feelings, which they cannot define anyhow in everyday life<sup>10</sup>; as their personal gallery connects them with people from all over the world, strangers and acquaintances, it appears more comfortable to express this latent self on the Internet, where many users do not know exactly who you are in offline reality. I see in this case that the online photographers are playing a game: they are hiding under a pseudonym, they are creating a gallery of photographs that express feelings, tastes, preferences, and other users have to guess or recognize the “real face”.

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<sup>10</sup> Schau and Gilly (2003) state that digital identity construction makes it possible to express latent and nested identities or to more fully disclose aspects of the self that are difficult to represent physically.

In this sense, I believe that nothing is randomly exposed: the photographs are part of a puzzle, as S8 was explaining, and this is a metaphor for the real life and the inner self which are transfigured in a virtual gallery with photographs.

That is why the majority of those who were interviewed, perceive the social space from the gallery as being personal and intimate, is defined as an identity place: “my gallery is me” – S5; “All my photographs express something very personal: love, melancholy, sadness” – S10.

my gallery is very important, it's a personal thing because is your space as photography is very intimate, is something that belongs to you (...) then you expose it in a space and it's very important that others come and leave opinions...if someone doesn't see your photography, then it doesn't exist, it has no value because the public gives the value (S4).

Moreover, I claim that these exhibited photographs are a part of the offline identity (in general, the latent part: tastes, preferences, feelings that are not expressed everyday and to everyone easily) on which is constructed the virtual one: I have to note that the virtual identity is a product of the exhibited works and of the online feedback and interactions inside the gallery. In sustaining this assumed opinion, S11 confesses what her photographs represent:

It's a mixture of parts from my personality, interests, passions, wishes and aspirations; also, they represent some periods of my life (depending on what inspired me in certain moments, I can easily associate some states, sensations or feelings that I once lived)

I found the problem related to those who practice photography as hobbyists, weekend photographers or amateur artists of great interest, as they resort to these online galleries to exhibit their works for the chance of recognition of their artistic value. They expect to get feedback from the audience (other users, online friends or anonymous visitors), especially positive feedback because this certain kind would give them confidence and psychological comfort that they are on the right path and that they have created a “possible” work of art. This need of feedback in the amateur phase could be explained by what Jean-Claude Chamboredon considered as “a non-intentional success at amateur photographers in the sense that art could be anywhere and they might create it without knowing it” (Bourdieu, 1990:138).

It's not enough publicity and...now that I am a beginner, an amateur and not many people know me... ok, now I did not have the pretension to become known through DeviantArt but I need a permanent feedback related to what I do. Moreover, if it is about what I like, then I want opinions (S1).

Exploring this problem, I find out that what determined these people to post their works on the Internet in the first place: curiosity; the curiosity of how their works are perceived by others, precisely how they are perceived through their photographs ( “I

post in the first place to see what general reaction I provoke” – S2; “from a need to hear an opinion about my work... I think is difficult to go on without an opinion, you need trust, a little help and a need of receiving critique” – S4; “I was curious to see how others will react to my profile and I needed feedback” – S10). This refers to the curiosity of how their photographs are perceived by others, what reaction they provoke, and, at a more specific level, how others perceive them through their personal photographs. Further, what I realized is that their personal webpage, with their online profile and their gallery, function as signs of “distinction”, in the sense of Bourdieu (1984), they are sources of social capital expressed by number of visitors and friends (other artists known through the gallery or friends from the offline reality) and sources of feedback which defines the charisma or how appreciated are these photographers inside the online community.

In fact, they make their gallery look attractive by posting photographs which could attract visitors, and they want to be perceived and accepted as they would like to appear and not how others think they are. Another interesting observation concerning the personal galleries is the fact that by browsing the photographs one can distinguish what kind of music the photographers like, what kind of themes they approach, what kind of person they want to represent. For instance, in S8’s gallery<sup>11</sup>, what drew my attention was the name of the avatar, “becoming myself” and then, entering the personal gallery I realized that the majority of the photographs are manipulated, dark and more conceptual but the main feature is the self-portrait. As S8 confessed, the photographs are about the inner self and feelings, which explains the number of self-portraits.

Another gallery, this time with three different sections: IDs, Metal Addict and Macro, where one can observe the preferences in music or photographic themes, is S9’s gallery<sup>12</sup>. This respondent also has the IDs section with self-portraits but also a section with pictures from the concerts that he/she has attended, from which you can realize that the metal music is a preference in musical tastes. As she/he affirms, this section has so many pictures because he/she considers that it is what he/she like most and what knows best. The Macro section is defined as “pictures that represent the beauty from a personal perspective”.

S2 has also a “Myself Section” on Deviant Art, but what I find more striking is that she has a photo diary<sup>13</sup>, where she expresses daily or weekly states of mind, lived experiences through photographs, in the same manner as S3, who is experimenting photography in all ways (digital, film, Polaroid, different textures etc) to express her “inner laboratory”<sup>14</sup>. S10’s gallery, “The Lady of the Snow”, is defined by fantasy and gothic photographs, but “all are personal”, in her own words; taking a look, they are mostly about her and her relationships, about love and melancholy<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://khymikaze.deviantart.com/gallery/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://thruadr.deviantart.com/gallery/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.seriadevineri.com/unda/pixelpost/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/oanabarna/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://thequietsnow.deviantart.com/gallery/>

S11's gallery<sup>16</sup> is also defined by the IDs section, which becomes a self-expression indicator that illustrates this need of exposing or revealing a part of the artistic identity.

This may sound as all the photograph art exposed in these virtual galleries is actually lowbrow art (Levine, 1990), in fact, this photographs do not necessarily represent a popular culture because not only the amateurs have personal galleries, but also the professionals. As Susan Sontag has argued, the emerging distinction between high and low culture was based in part on an evaluation of the difference between unique and mass-produced objects (cited in Levine, 1990:164). Taking into consideration this statement, I would argue that these personal photographs are above this dichotomy high-low art because they are not mass-produced objects but are unique through an essential feature: defining identities on the Internet and, also, transform the personal galleries in identity places, places of interaction and, in the same time, of self-exposure. Furthermore, I have to explain that this uniqueness is not defined by themes or techniques (which among photographers are mostly repetitive), but when I called them unique I refer strictly to their purpose of being exhibited: expressing an online identity, a part of it or a daily narrative from the offline life. As Steffen Dalsgaard argued, in an article about Facebook's personal pages, „they give everyone the chance to be individual in the sense of being unique, because any person can be shown as being in the centre of a social universe – their own. No matter who you are, your Facebook website has you as the one in focus” (2008:9).

## Conclusions and discussions

In this paper, my purpose was to draw attention to how artistic identity is constructed inside virtual art galleries, where the photographers maintain a personal gallery with their photographs and have a permanent public, which constantly pursue their latest works.

This article represents the results of a thoroughgoing study on virtual identities, in which the personal gallery functions like an “identity card” in the virtual world and a place where individuals can construct their desired self through what they post, how they describe themselves and their photographs, how many friends have and how active they are inside the virtual gallery. This constructed identity is an extension of the offline self, with feelings, states of mind, aspirations and interests that can be expressed easily through an avatar on the Internet, that is why the personal galleries become a comfortable place of exhibiting photographs to users from all over the world, mostly strangers that do not know the offline person, behind the gallery. In addition, the online identity is a product of the virtual relations with other photo-users, that share almost the same interests, the same virtual space, and it is shaped by their feedback and critiques. One major change assigned to the online exposition is related to the status of photography: it detaches from its ordinary social function of remembering and acquires new functions: “portraying” online identities, maintaining relations with other users and

<sup>16</sup> <http://chocollat.deviantart.com/gallery/>

connecting the photographer with the whole community through his personal gallery. The photographs become the source of social capital inside this virtual community and the basis on which all the social interactions are taking place. In a further research I intend to explore more my argument regarding the online identity that is grounded in the first place on the offline self with its inner feelings, states of mind and experiences, that I interpreted as being difficult to be expressed in everyday life. I argued that the online gallery permits an easier expression of the inner person just because the users have the comfort of pseudonymity and the majority of people are strangers and are spread around the world, which it implies a weaker responsibility in what concerns what they pretend that they are on the Internet. This article is only a step towards a future understanding of the new meanings which the artistic phenomenon is endowed with in the era of digital technologies.

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## **Annex 1**

S1 – A.M, female, 23 years, amateur  
S2 - C.G , female, 22 years, professional  
S3 - O.B, female, 22 years, professional  
S4 - S. S , female, 21 years, amateur  
S5 – C.C, male, 22 years, amateur  
S6 – T.B, male, 25 years, amateur  
S7 - A.B, female, 58 years, amateur  
S8 - C.S, female, 22 years, amateur  
S9 – G.D, female, 25 years, amateur  
S10 – Z.M, female, 23 years, amateur  
S11 – C.C, female, 23 years, amateur  
S12 – P.C, male, 28 years, professional  
S13 – A.C, male, 23 years, amateur



## Annex 2

1. Spune-mi cateva cuvinte despre tine ca si fotograf amator/profesionist?ce reprezinta fotografia pentru tine?Este o pasiune, un hobby, un experiment?Altceva?Ce anume?
2. Imi poti spune in ce galerie virtuala ai postate lucrarile? Imi poti da mai multe detalii despre aceasta galerie?(este o galerie deschisa vanzarilor? Stii cine o detine? Stii cine posteaza de obicei in aceasta galerie?ce gen de creatii?profilul galeriei-este numai pt expus/discutii/download-uri)
3. De unde ai aflat de aceasta galerie?
4. Cum ai inceput sa postezi?
5. De ce ai ales sa-ti expui fotografiile in aceasta galerie?
6. Ce anume te determina sa postezi/ sa iti faci publice lucrarile intr-o galerie virtuala? Cat de important e feedback-ul online pentru tine ca si fotograf?
7. Ce reprezinta pentru tine si pentru fotografiile tale aceasta galerie ca spatiu virtual?
8. Descrie-mi un pic galeria personala. Fotografiile sunt aranjate intr-o anumita ordine?Ce tematici abordezi?Ce iti place sa fotografiezi? ( ma intereseaza in principiu, daca tematicile abordate exprima gusturi in materie de muzica, ceea ce iti place, ceea ce te revolta, fotografia exprima ceva personal sau pur si simplu, ce te inspira pe moment, ocazional, nu are nimic premeditat sau planuit dinainte)
9. De obicei, ce tip de fotografii alegi sa fie expuse pe internet, in galeria proprie? (ex. ai anumite criterii?cum selectezi ce apare in galerie si ce nu?)
10. Ce reprezinta fotografiile expuse in galeria de pe internet pentru tine ca artist foto?
11. Acum as vrea sa discutam un pic despre feedback :
12. Cat de important este feedbackul in ceea ce faci?
13. In ce fel te ajuta feedbackul primit de la vizitatorii galeriei/site-ului?te influenteaza in conceptia artistica?
14. Mi-ai putea spune daca inscrierea ca membru al galeriei te-a influentat sa abordezi noi tematici/sa te inspire?
15. Faci parte dintr-un grup virtual/comunitate in cadrul acestei galerii?Cum se numeste?Cum ai devenit membru?
16. Cunosti si alti artisti din cadrul galeriei?Care este relatia cu acestia?Cum te raportezi la ei?(tineti legatura, comentezi pozitiv lucrarile lor)
17. Ce inseamna sa fii activ in galerie?sa ai activitate artistica?(participi la concursuri online/pe site?trebuie sa ai un anumit numar de posturi pe o perioada de timp data?Esti anuntat de evenimente viitoare/concursuri?te implici in discutii pe forum)
18. Esti sanctionat daca nu postezi nimic pe o perioada indelungata? primești notificari din cadrul galeriei?

19. Mi-ai putea spune daca cei din interiorul galeriei manifesta o tendinta pentru un anumit gen artistic sau tematica artistica decat altele?(fotografie/grafica/pictura sau natura statica/peisaj/portret/abstract)Daca da, imi poti spune daca te-ai confruntat cu situatia de a nu-ti fi apreciate anumite lucrari tocmai din cauza faptului ca acestea nu se incadreaza in preferintele majoritatii celor din galerie?
20. Imi poti spune cate ceva despre creatiile tale?ce iti place sa fotografiezi preferintele tale/ ce te inspira/in ce categorie/gen artistic se pot incadra lucrarile tale? Tematica?

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