

AVATARS for artistic and technological learning

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning

Ángeles Saura

lecturer

Autonomous University of Madrid

E-mail: angeles.saura@uam.es

Cristina Moreno

lecturer

Autonomous University of Madrid

E-mail: cristina.moreno@uam.es

Abstract

This artistic research aims for the artistic and technological professional development of teachers of art. We have studied the theories of McLuhan and Marc Prensky. We have also reviewed literature about the development of artistic workshops with the theme of identity. We have focused on case studies conducted by Escaño, Zafra, Acaso, Agra and Eça, among others. We provide a new methodology in the field of art education using Internet and social networks for the artistic and technological professional development of Art teachers.

AVATARS, international exhibition, has been organized by Saura Angeles from research group UAM : PR-007 "Digital Resources for Arts Education". It opened in June 2009. It is about the concept of network identity. AVATARS is a collective and itinerant exhibition of self-portraits. It has been put together at the teacher-artists's network E@ (<http://www.arteweb.ning.com/>). Coordinated by teachers and artists, it comes in two formats: analog and digital. 120 participating artists from 12 Latin American countries sent their works to form part of a permanent virtual

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning

exhibition. The works chosen by the selection committee were printed on paper at Madrid and others cities. Pedro Villarrubia designed a poster showing all participants' works and customized it depending on the context and date of exhibition in each country. It continues its journey through different universities and galleries around the world. The exhibition is an excuse to have a workshop and a meeting of art teachers in order to start developing collaborative work online.

Key words: art, education, digital resources, avatars

Introduction

Avatars is the name we give to the images we use to interact on internet through a variety of social networks (Saura, 2009). Web surfers may use one or more of these, and sometimes change them frequently, depending on their interests. These images, generally two-dimensional and in a square format, are usually photographs or drawings, concrete or abstract. They show up on our profile whenever we contact other users by e-mail, in chat rooms or through videoconference, to mention a few.

Nowadays, almost everyone is present on internet with a visible image. We must be prepared, as someone somewhere will sooner or later be placing a tag with our name on a photograph from a party or some other event and everyone else will be able to identify us. These images have an emotional meaning, they speak about us and in a sense, they certify our existence (Saura, 2011).

"Those who have not yet discovered or who have chosen not to take part in this meta-media banquet, those who do not exist on the web, those who decline to because it drains the blood out of real life, those who defend a natural existence, are missing out on an important side of living today, since not existing on the web amounts to not existing in your time". (M.J. Abad, 2010)

Studies have shown evidence of the importance of education in the successful development of modern societies. We live in a complex world, fraught with uncertainties. The artistic minded have always worked with complex models of expression and, on the teaching front, have developed artistic projects that are saturated with uncertainty with regard to the end result. We artists have a great deal to offer in the field of education, in many different ways (Acaso, 2009).

Today, teachers of artistic branches of learning quite naturally assume a virtual working context in which digital imaging is a key element to artistic teaching and communication, to social inclusion or exclusion, in which our self-portraits are called avatars (Fig.1).

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning



Fig. 1 Nicolás Vilamitjana's avatars , 2010

AVATARS Exhibition Project

What follows is a summary of the artistic and educational research project carried out between 2010-2012 by the research group known as “Digital Resources for Artistic Education” (UAM: PR-007).

AVATARS is the title given to a collective, international and itinerant exhibition of self-portraits. It was organized entirely by working collaboratively on the Internet through the social network *E@: Educación artística 3.0*, which can be reached from the URL www.arteweb.ning.com. (Fig. 2)

E@: EDUCACIÓN ARTÍSTICA 3.0



AVATARS for
artistic and
technological
learning

Fig. 2 E@, www.arteweb.ning.com

This project is artistic in format and in continual development. It allows us to focus on the activities of a group of artists working together, connected through internet.

As members of a social group that encourages participation and imagination, we develop our digital skills. (Asensio, 2011). Members interact with the knowledge they have gained through a social network, in *NING* format. The network was specially designed for developing cultural, artistic and learning-to-learn skills. It is proving useful for online learning to artists-educators who, having taken on a leading role, develop their ITC skills without actually mentioning ICT, discussing Art instead.

The social network E@ was created by Ángeles Saura in January 2010. Lecturer at the Department of Artistic Education of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at the Autonoma University of Madrid, Spain; doctor in Fine Arts by the Complutense University of Madrid and Master of Science in Educational IT by the UNED (Open University of Spain).

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning

E@ has flourished within the context of another, wider-reaching inter-university research project known as *"Interterritorialidades 2.0"*. Initially, this involved just nine lecturers from universities in Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Spain and Venezuela (Saura, 2010) . Sponsored by the Autonoma University of Madrid and in collaboration with Banco de Santander, it is currently ongoing. On 1 January 2012, the E@ Network completed two years of its existence and, today, continues to extend links for active communication between more than 1500 teachers & artists in 35 different countries.

The exhibition AVATARS speaks with images of individuals and citizens. It is a pretext for critical reflection on identity; to move teachers action, promoting professional, artistic and academic discussion. Pedro Villarrubia designed a poster showing all participants' works and customized it depending on the context and date of exhibition in each country (Fig.3).

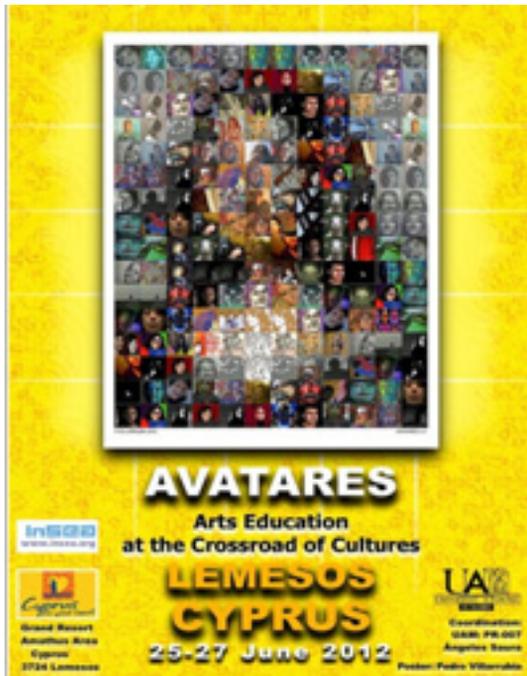


Fig. 3 Avatars; Cyprus's poster exhibition (2012)

One of the themes addressed is the need for teachers of arts to engage in lifelong learning through an artistic research project. This project employs

artistic procedures from the fields of drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and video, among others, but it also incorporates technological methods, being developed entirely on internet and making full use of the information technology infrastructure.

In this inter-cultural project, every individual is equally important, equally active and listened to. Artists inhabit a new common space, inter-connected. The cloud is their hub, their new artistic living space. It is not a museum, it is closer to a virtual workshop where they all work together and where their works can grow and multiply.

The working premise is in appearance very simple. Artists are asked to think about the image they want to use to present themselves to others on the web; they create their avatar using artistic and technological means; they send it by e-mail to the coordinator of the virtual exhibition, who does two things: posts it on the network and takes it to a digital press. The result is a two-fold existence and a double experience: virtual and real, from which we can all learn something.

Until now, analog has prevailed over digital in the teacher-training process for Artistic Education. Thus, Faculties of Fine Arts and Schools of Arts and Crafts have traditionally focused on solving problems related to plastic and audiovisual expression rather than on understanding reality as a social system developed within a Cybersociety context (Saura, 2005).

The importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has grown enormously, taking up a key role in our lives. It is very difficult to remain invisible on the web. At present, declining to have an online image can be considered bordering on a counter-cultural statement. On receiving an email, we also receive an image of the message's author. Additionally, we are also offered access to biographic and professional data. This has many weighty implications for us all. A single image awakens many others, giving rise to fantasies and ideas about its owner. According to Remedios Zafra, professor of new artistic practices and new forms of collective communication and social action, expert in communication, cyberculture and virtual worlds at the University of Sevilla, the traditional passport is no longer any use for travelling in virtual worlds.

"Online users demand much more than just a mugshot." (Zafra, 2010)

What does our profile photo say about us on social networks? These images we use to present ourselves on social networks are the object of study in our artistic research. They provide information and reveal truths and untruths about users. No-one is as ugly as the photo on their ID card, or as lovely as their profile photo. We have become resigned to knowing that our ID photos don't do us justice, but we dedicate time and patience to achieving the best possible look for posting on internet, and our online image opens and closes more doors than that ID photo.

Talking of the huge changes that the so-called information age brings has already become obsolete; we are living in a communication society transforming at full speed into digital. These changes affect the way we view technology and, in turn, how this affects its migration toward specific scenarios of educational application for developing cultural and artistic competencies. (Caballero, 2009).

Artistic Education 2.0

Learning how to learn is a skill developed on internet that necessarily integrates ICT in day to day learning tasks, changing the teaching model centred around the course matter for each subject. We need a diversified teaching environment in which all the members of the social network have a prominent role to play. In order to ensure the conditions for successful integration of this new educational technology, the expected educational changes will not depend solely on the digital technology, but on the modifications to the roles of educators and students, as well as on the interrelations between these modifications, the information and the experience. (Brea, 2010) At the Autonoma University of Madrid we have gradually introduced new technologies into the new virtual teaching environments, in many cases without altering the traditional order governing their use and we have also adopted the current models for the transmission of knowledge in response to the need for innovation, making use today's technologies to begin building the curriculum for the future (Marín, 2010). Without the traditional educational framework, teachers lack the tools to continue learning in a structured manner. To a great extent, creative learning has been confined to artistic disciplines, and the need to face the uncertain

by transforming it into something that is predictable, foreseeable, is specific to our field of knowledge, Arts Education for Visual Culture.

We should consider artistic education as a process for understanding ourselves and the world (Hernández, 2008). Does it make sense today to focus our artistic subjects through the development of manual skills? We cannot train professional artisans or artists in the same way as we teach primary and secondary school students or train teachers. (Fig.4)



Fig. 4 UAM; Madrid, 2005

Our presence on the network is perceived through an image that reflects our personality. There are many examples through history of the use of an artistic image with propagandistic purposes. An image that is able to create an emotional impact at first sight. For example, at a location very close to Madrid, in the gardens surrounding the palace at Real Sitio de San Idelfonso de Segovia, there is a profusion of fountains with mythological themes. As these gardens belonged to the king, many of the myths depicted may be interpreted as propaganda. The presence of Neptune (Fig. 5) on the fountains that embellish the Royal Palace gardens is also intended to highlight the status to the Monarch. Certain heroes, such as Perseus, or gods, like Apollo, act as alter-egos that refer symbolically to the King.

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning



Fig.5 Neptuno's fountain. Segovia, Spain.

Our self-portraits have ceased being epic biographical monuments. Our image will appear alongside every interaction, every comment and will become the visual symbol of our online identity (Asensio, 2011). Some users are faithful to their first profile image whilst others need to keep changing their identity, updating or redefining themselves at each phase of their existence. It isn't easy to reflect our mood without resorting to stereotyped icons. The continual flow of information in the digital age is accompanied by the participants' changing identities. Artists, accustomed to working with tools geared towards personal creativity, can design and update a more artistic self-expression (Fig.6)



Fig.6 Examples of avatars; Workshop- Cyprus, 2012

The impact of profile images on social networks is already the subject of studies at several universities. A new professional job description appears in the labour market. These individuals are responsible for studying strategy and managing the so-called online impact. Professor Joseph B. Walker of Michigan University claims that people with attractive friends on Facebook is seen in a better light than the rest (El País, 2012).

Uploading a photo of ourselves when we were younger or slimmer is common amongst Internet users. Mark R. Leary, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, also studies the factors involved when we edit our online image. Some people try to impress, others are more ascetic and do not change their image at all, although a little deception is the general rule. An idealised or aspirational image, rather than what is actually the case, is the norm.

Questions and Hypotheses for this Artistic Research

1. Does the learning methodology, based on the artist-teachers' creativity, foster a positive impact on the development of cultural and artistic skills?
2. Can artistic activity promote the development of digital skills?

Project Methodology

This is an applied methodology, based upon the co-creation and co-participation in activity which follows a fivefold developmental sequence: Participation, Inspiration, Ideation, Integration and Implementation.

The five stage process has been validated based on three principal research phases:

- Generation: using exploratory research techniques by means of audiovisual communication via the Internet, semi-structured information regarding artistic activities has been obtained from the teachers. By running avatar creation workshops, utilising analogue and digital methods to produce avatars, various proposals have been developed for participants' expression and creativity.
- Validation: using artistic research techniques we proceeded to validate the AVATAR concept and its characteristics by presenting a selection of

teachers' works of art and a series of experimental student trials, observing their degree of engagement, perception of quality and satisfaction with the proposed solutions for the innovation and strategic development of the project.

- Application: Definition of the AVATAR concept and its variations. Implementation of an observatory for viewing the permanent virtual exhibition using our social network as the communication platform (24 hours / 7 days a week), with representative samples from artists from different countries, incorporating a continuous improvement process to allow continuous updating of the exhibition content. Trends and best practices were detected in different fields (Education Observatory).

Last but not least, regarding the operational procedures and strategy for this international project, these developments take place within the framework of the Masters Degree in Secondary Education and Degree studies for Infant and Primary Teaching at the Autonomous University of Madrid, in addition to existing curricula of our international colleagues at IES Piaget (and others). Each group of teachers involved in each country applies the methodology as a research objective. Therefore our proposal takes advantage of every opportunity for exposure in a real context (academic) in order to deliver a specific international training seminar or workshop (Fig.5) for the transmission of knowledge.

It is important to keep in mind that the meeting of professionals in real environments (by visiting the different cities) lays the basis for future collaborations via the Internet.

Project's preliminary findings

First of all, the design process of our avatar has promoted reflection on identity. Nobody gave us instructions for creating the image itself. After observing the works presented, we found that the question "Who am I?" it is answered with the following ideas: I am what I do, my profession, my sex, my feelings, the things I like...Net users often respond in that way but many of us (artists) , we have raised the question "Am I always the same?". Only a collage can talk about me, because there are an image for each of that ideas (Fig. 7). It is also possible that one day I feel different from another.

You have to choose, it may be worth all the images, but artists-teachers chose the image they wanted to give to others, teachers and students. Then, personal reflection has given way to a collective reflection in terms of ethics.

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning



Fig.7 Claudia Winter's avatars (Chile, 2012)

This ambitious project is still ongoing. With the AVATARS art project we have promoted:

- The development of new knowledge and a better understanding of art education in the context of learning from a post-modern visual cultural perspective.
- The development of new skills for art education practitioners using contemporary art methods.
- The exchange of knowledge and experience between teachers and investigators in the field of education in the Arts.
- The development of inter-cultural skills and respect towards different forms of expression and knowledge.
- Meaningful collaboration between art education researchers practising in different parts of Europe and America (Fig.8).

AVATARS for
artistic and
tecnological
learning



Fig.8 Avatares's workshop (Viseu, 2011)

Specific Project Objectives

Throughout this project has been kept in mind the Unesco Competency Standards for Teachers, 2009 (downloaded 1st June, 2012 from: <http://www.eduteka.org/EstandaresDocentesUnesco.php>), also the wide diffusion of artistic and technological discoveries and the internationalisation of technology transfer in the context of Higher Education. Provide educators with important information regarding skills most likely to be needed by future students; help to bridge the gap between artists' technical training and the necessary social dimension of the work they carry out, taking into account the needs of today's society and collect and analyse empirical evidence as to what artist-teachers do in their daily professional work; provide objective validation of creative abilities in order to optimize the teaching-learning process in formal and informal education situations, drawing on the active participation and involvement of people in many countries.

The project includes case studies based on preliminary findings obtained from pilot trials in Spain, Brazil, Cuba and Portugal. It aims to further investigate, validate and share this new conceptual approach in other European Union and American countries where researchers are already working with the project's lead developer. For example, United Kingdom, Italy, Cyprus, Colombia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico and Paraguay among others.

Future Prospects

The next phase of the artistic research will follow the following design: First step; qualitative exploration of workshops with photography, video and Internet (generation phase). Second step; quantitative confirmation. Conducting participant surveys (validation phase). Third step; performance monitoring during the workshops held in different situations (implementation phase).

Conclusions

We work as teachers, researchers and artists we combine all these facets to reinforce our commitment to Arts Education; as teacher-trainers, not only by teaching but also as practising artists, curating exhibitions and researching areas related to aesthetics, art criticism, sociology or psychology.

The development of this project involving a multidisciplinary research group, with different and converging scientific and professional backgrounds (art, design, anthropology, teaching) has been very effective, given its international scope. The artist-teachers, today's citizens and current members of the E@ social network, magically emerge from their self-profiles and avatars, their real selves and invented selves, individuals and group members.

Our avatars have grown, invading reality. They have already visited Segovia, Caracas, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Goiania, Toledo, Madrid, Orlando, Bucaramanga, Coimbra, Braganza, Oporto, Viseu, Mirandela, Medellin, Panama, Jaen and Cyprus. The rest of the world awaits, where we will travel with everyone's avatars in our suit cases. At every destination we will invite local artist-teachers to participate in our exhibition. We wish to continue to develop our initiative and promote strategies for everyone to learn, exploring new channels from an interdisciplinary approach open to the integral understanding of the human being. The project lives as each participant promotes it within their own teaching practise. Paradoxically, our avatars have invaded the real world and travel further than many of us. We can observe from the cloud, at the web address: www.arteweb.ning.com

References

- Acaso, M. (2009). *La educación artística no son manualidades. Nuevas prácticas en la enseñanza de las artes y la cultura visual*. Madrid: Catarata.
- Asensio, M. & Asenjo, E. (2011). *Lazos de luz azul*. Barcelona: UOC.
- Brea, J. L. (2010). *Las tres eras de la imagen*. Barcelona: Akal.
- Caballero, S. (2008). *Tránsito digital en el ámbito educativo*. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación.
- Hernández, F. (2008). *Espigadores de la cultura visual*. Barcelona: Octaedro.
- Marín, R. (2010). *Las investigaciones en educación artística y las metodologías artísticas de investigación en educación: Temas, tendencias y miradas*. Educação, Porto Alegre, 34(3), 271-287, set/dez.
- Saura, A. (2005). *Uso del diseño y la imagen tecnológica en las presentaciones multimedia para la comunicación audiovisual. Aplicación para la enseñanza artística*. Tesis. UCM.
- Saura, A. & Naranjo, R.; Méndez, A. (2009). *Desarrollo de competencias en clave Web 2.0 para la educación artística*. Relada 3 (1), 37-45. Madrid: ADA.
- Saura, A. & Sardelich, M. (2010). *Interterritorialidades en web 2.0. Posibilidades para la formación continua del maestro de educación artística en el contexto latinoamericano*. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación Nº 52/3.
- Saura, A. (2011). *Innovación educativa con TIC en Educación Artística, Plástica y Visual. Líneas de investigación y estudios de casos*. Sevilla: Eduforma.