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We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself . . . Carl Gustav Jung

Abstract: This qualitative research represents a subjective exploration of a small-scale photographic project, based on two categories of images:
    1. Drawings of children (age 3 to 8), posted on Flickr - one of the largest online photo management and sharing application (http://www.flickr.com/about/)
    2. Desensitized violent images posted on Flickr

    Every final image of this project is realized by combining a child drawing with a violent desensitized image.

    The use of imagery from Flickr sprang from the idea that this site is a kind of democratic and extended communication site mainly based on visual messages.

    The main goal of this research was to explore an artistic method of visual production that can be part of an interrogational and educational strategy intended for secondary and postsecondary level.

    The final educational purpose is to generate awareness and to determine a more responsible attitude regarding the construction of cyberspace knowledge, which has the tendency to become the main pedagogical site today. (Giroux, 2000, para 33)

The Disenchanting of the Desensitized Digital Image as Artistic and Educational Visual Strategy

I. The personal memory as generative element of creation and research

The evidence is a surface quality. The science is the triumph of the evidence, a proliferation of the surface. It makes us the master of the exterior world. At the same time it exiles us outside of the profound truth. Cheik Hamidou Kane

We live in a present governed by our mixed and contorted old memories. Our present life is nothing more than an anticipative mask of collected memories. So, the starting point of this project is marked by two types of memories:
    1. The old personal recollection as an the element that generates my research on the rhetoric of the media.
    2. The recent personal memories as an element that generated my research on the violence of the media.

I.1. The old personal recollection

1980. A small town in Romania. I remember I was a student at secondary level. The first thing I used to do every morning, at that time, was to run to the end of our garden and live the first moment of the day in a secret meeting with the Earth, the River, and the Sunrise all together. It was the privileged way of living, to listen to the special silence of a place. I was trying to identify myself with the image of that place. It was a time that seemed to me to be in perfect agreement with Jung citing Goethe. 'The soul of man / is like the water/ it is coming from the sky/ and return back to the sky.' (Jung, 2006, p. 23)

But today all my mornings are marked by a new habit: making my sight run on the surface of a little space called computer screen. The Internet replaces the little river from my garden. The paradisiacal garden was exchanged for an ensorcelled WEB. The cyberspace became the river 'that carries us with it.' (Berger, 2007, p. 90) Today all my days are under the power of the river of this new virtual imagery. 'A couple of years ago I couldn't imagine what I would do with a computer; now I can't imagine what I would do without one.' (Wheeler, 2002, p. 28)

My world became an accumulation of stereotyped concepts and digital imagery. I'm no longer aware of connections, juxtapositions, differences, contrasts or possible contradictions of the world. I don't make any effort to understand the hidden structure of this digital architecture. I have all confidence in their architect. His truth is my truth. It is more comfortable to make use of a preconceived truth.

But, from time to time, it happens to me to realize that the global image of our digital world is fragmented, stereotyped, and dominated by a very complex and sophisticated type of violence. The world is divided according to this subversive violence.

Facing this fragmented but uniform world of violence at the same time, I have to understand that the knowledge doesn't help us to be aware and to respect our difference.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
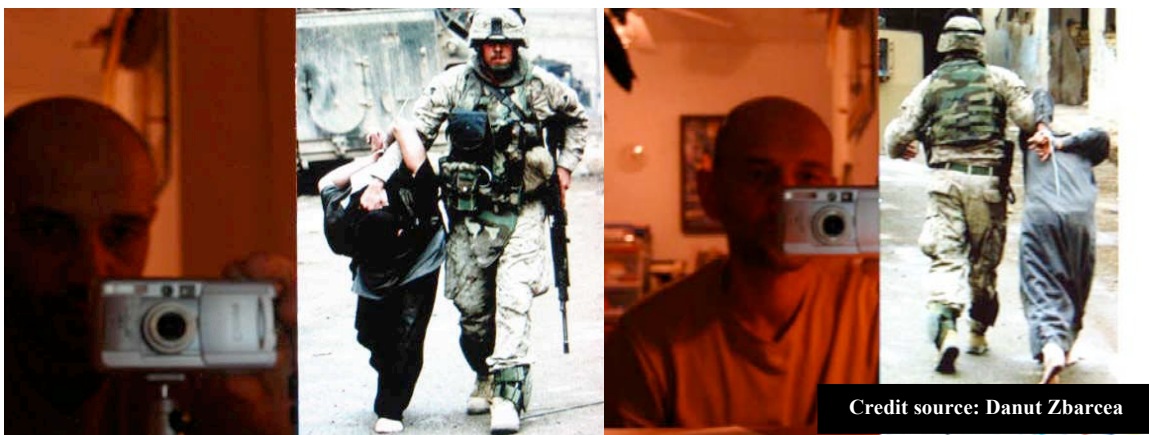
Our electrical world continues to see some people or communities only as blessed people and others only as evil people. At this point I feel myself in a kind of perfect understanding with Abdallah al-Ansari (d. 1088/9) when he is saying: 'Men are like addicts of drink/, Unaware of their own state.' (Baldock, 2004, p. 125). I realize then that, in order to be aware, I have to start by understanding the confusion I live in.

I.2. Recent memory

Few months ago I was called to replace, for one day, a teacher at primary school level. Nothing special until the moment I saw two kids trying to create a gun using their LEGO. This moment became a memory, a kind of revelation of that day. 'Why a gun?', I questioned myself. This question became one of the points of departure for this research about hypermedia and violence.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

When I got home, I did a little visual research on Flickr by using key-words.

The results surprised me and made me understand that 'the meanings of the individual images and the collection itself are in the eye of the beholder.' (Murray, 2008: 7/2 147).

Fifteen minutes of research were enough to put in evidence the memories of all these people that express themselves by these visual desires.

Violence : 58 466 results (images)
Guns : 409 449 results
Rifle : 56 631 results
Kids and guns : 8 097 results
Girls and guns : 15 157 results
Army and girls : 9 059 results
Army : 537 234 results

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Giotto : 450 results
Michelangelo : 1617 results
Brancusi : 1345 results
Van Gogh : 690 results
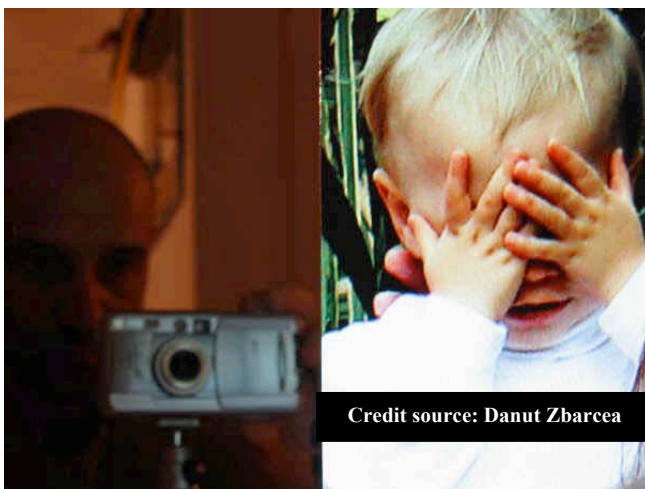
Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

So, why (or why not) a creative research process and teaching on private imagery launched on Internet?

1. Because today we are conditioned by a new type of beauty: the confused and the self-referential digital world. Today 'it's hard to tell where you leave off and the camera begins.' (Sontag, 1977, p. 186)

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
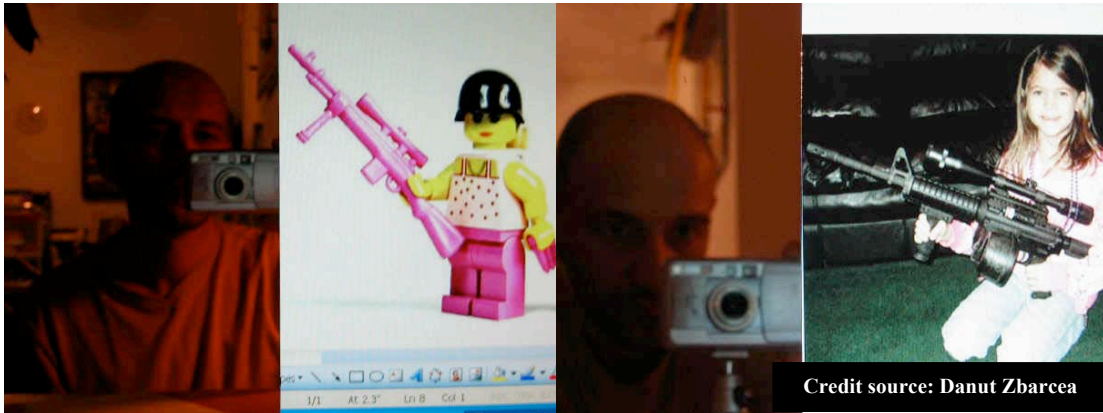
2. Because the fast transformation of technology changes fundamentally our own state of connection to the natural world. Direct connections are replaced by hypermediated perceptions of the natural world. 'The power of photography has in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals.' (Sontag, 1977, p. 179)

3. Because the natural world has become a digital non–place show. Our essential rhythm of life depends more and more on this single means of communication. The WEB is a synonym of a politically and virtually negotiated contemporary silk road. The confusion becomes the law of the knowledge and communication horizons.

'Nietzsche, nearly a century ago, already named our period the Age of Comparisons. There were formerly horizons within which people lived and thought and mythologized. There are now no more horizons. And with the dissolution of horizons we have experienced and we are experiencing collisions, not only of peoples but also of their mythologies.' (Campbell, 1966, p. 254)

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
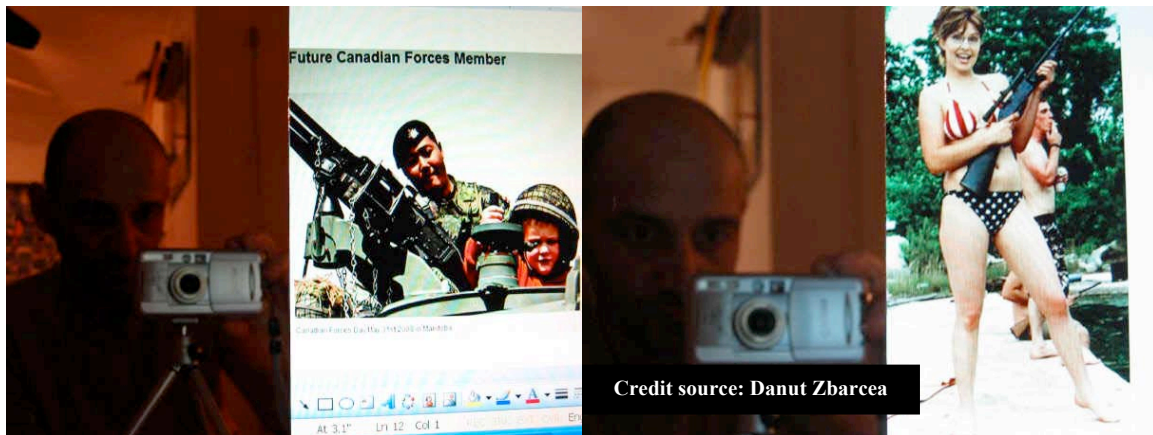
4. Because all our knowledge can be digitally transformed today ad infinitum. The world we know is disenchanted. Our disinformational capacity invites us to transform all history in pure fictional desire. All mysteries of the world are perverted.

5. Because the electronic highway can erase any kind of right idea. The WEB information can be manipulated to disappearance. 'The Web has turned our culture inside out. One's own web page is not one's own web page.' (Gate Keepers, 2003, p. 212-213)

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
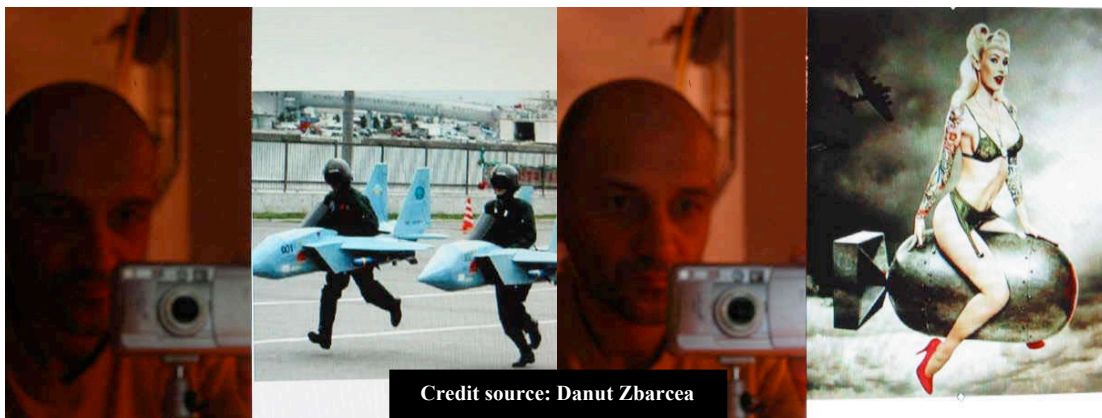
6. Because the democratization of digital manipulation doesn't free us from our anxiety and from our prison of cultural prejudices: 'Men still kill one another, they have not yet understood how they live, why they live; politicians fail to observe that the Earth is an entity…' (Sontag, 1977, p. 196)

II. Why Flickr?
1. Because Flickr can be considered now 'one of the most popular sites on hypermedia, a non-place of meeting'. (Murray, 2008: 7/2 147) There – through thousands of images –, one can be in contact with a virtual decentralized community.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

2. Flickr is 'a free collaborative digital experience'. (Murray, 2008: 7/2 147) One can exchange almost everything here: digital recollections, judgments and identities.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

3. Every virtualized moment is already memory and desire. Flickr's visual subcultures reveal a great appetite for violence. People like being photographed with guns. People like to kill digitally.

4. Because Flickr is, in fact, a sample of the big novel that we are living today. There is no hierarchy. There is only transience, alterity, alienation, immediacy, and people's collaborative hypermediate aesthetic.

5. Because Flickr is one of important pedagogical sites, an exchange market called ephemera; here one brings a new type of photography that expresses violence as desensitized mimesis, charged by a domestic irony.

III. Why violence?

Because violence is learned through 'an emotional and social cognitive process.' (Trend, 2007, p. 32)

A lot of people consider that the violence of the media doesn't affect them. 'Thus, most people believe that other people are at risk whereas they are free from risk. This difference in perception between one's self and others has been labeled the third-person effect.' (Potter, 1990, p. 31-52)

But, in real life, facing violent messages, we are in danger because of different types of negative effects (seduction, desensitization, imitation, and many others).

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

IV. Why the desensitized violence?

The aesthetic doesn't necessarily mean the ethical. (Lester, 2003, p. 7) 'Aesthetized violence' is more dangerous than pure violence. Humor and visual phantasms make us forget (apparently) the violence of the image. (Potter, p.1990,)

All of these turn us into passive participants of the spectacle of violence. We become insensible consumers of the show of violence, without being able to think of their subtle effects. Our permissive ways of acting through the visual is, in fact, complicity with the process of disenchanting and desensitizing our own way of perceiving the world we live. Violent imagery becomes desensitized this way.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

V. Theoretic, artistic and visual analyze based on key-images

The theoretical design of this project has as a point of departure some key-ideas developed by Susan Murray in her study called 'Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics'. I used this study (and others) in order to reinforce my own discoveries concerning the visual rhetoric of Flickr.

There are three main ideas that influenced the beginning of the project: 1. the digital photography is a 'recorded object'; 2. 'it is transparent'; 3. also, it is an 'immanent place'. (Sutton, 2007, p.163) There is no photographic memory that can be seen in only one way. It has the capacity to be a multi level significant object.

Concerning the real format of the project, I used different identifiable types of images launched on Flickr. For example, the image representing a child with a gun is one of the identifiable categories.


Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

Starting from this category I created a series of key-words to express the social causal context (environment – violence – child – learning process – environment).

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

Every day of social life prove us that an aggressive social environment generates violence. Referring to this aspect Jidu Khrisknamurti launched his well known quote: 'The environment is yourself and your action.' (Khrisknamurti, 1948, para 7)

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
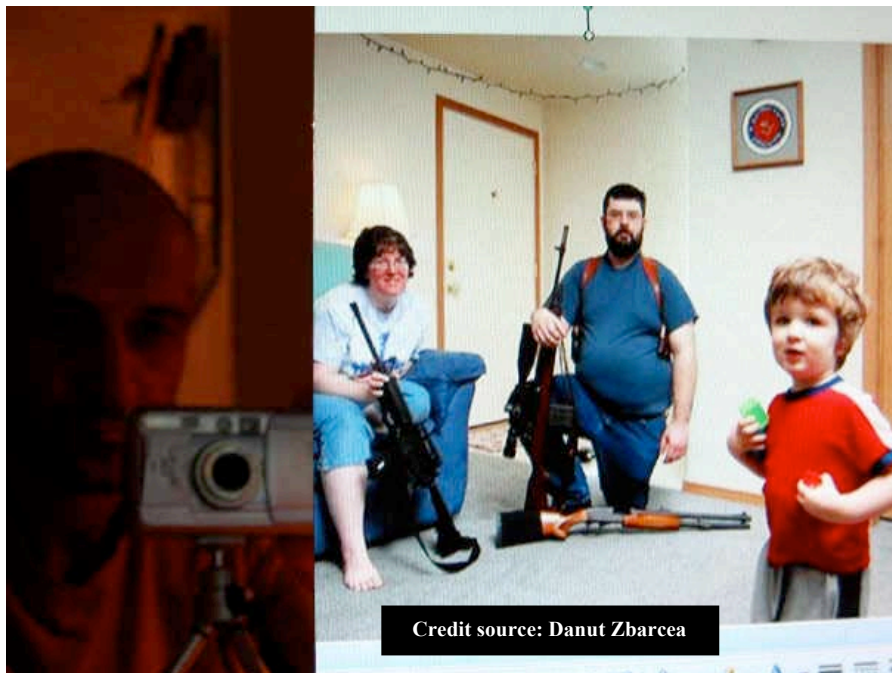
This chain of words was used as guide through the process of creation. In fact, the questioning is centered on the idea of social environment.

Going back to our example about kids and guns we can claim that every image can make us open a multi question. The first question could concern the photography as an object. In our case, we talk about a digital object without an

original. (Bardis, 2004, 3/3) The original is the digital itself. So, we talk about a meta-object. The second question could relate to the photographic moment; being photographed, the moment is already 'memory and desire' (Grønstad, 2006, para 2). The third question is about aesthetic; digital contemporary image is an expression of 'immediacy' (Virilio, 2003, p. 14). The other question that arises can refer to the author and his intentions, to the content of the image, and to meaning. Can we say that the image is violent? Who is the author? What were the reasons for doing this picture? What kind of reactions the author wanted to generate? Why does the child have this attitude before the camera? What kind of environment is the child exposed to? What identity does the child have? What is the child doing? Is he playing or is he defending himself? Why did he close his eyes? He seems to be afraid. Why?

One of the underlying ideas of the project is that learning can start as an innocent play with LEGO, but it can hide at the same time a stereotypical judgement such as enemy, fear, kill. The aggressive way of being is installed through apparent innocent imagery, through humor mixed with violence, through the process of desensitization. (Potter, 2003, p. 26)

The gun becomes an obsessive cult object. The learning process sustains the pleasure of killing; we are defending ourselves facing an invisible enemy: the fear that media sold us every moment of life. 'Fear begins with things we fear, but over time, with enough repetition and expanded use, it becomes a way of looking at life.' (Altheide, 2002, p. 3)

Violence produces the culture of fear. Everything is labeled today with an advertisement of fear. Violence (as an indefinite mask) can take various forms: it can be fashionable or enjoyable, desensitized. Violence of us creates others ways of violent living. 'Fear influences identity and situations in life.' (Altheide, 2002, p. 8)

VI. The desensitization of desensitized image
The project was completed in several steps:
- I decided to use as tools a computer connected to the Internet and a Cannon digital camera (3 megapixels);
- I undertook research concerning the visual rhetoric used on Flickr;
- I took pictures of images that I found considering that the Internet is my new reality;
- I archived all these pictures related to the categories identified during my research (violence, guns, rifle, kids and guns, army and girls, army);
- I combined the children's drawings (that I found posted on Flickr) with the "desensitized" violent images by using Word Windows 2003;
- I printed the mixed images;
- I installed every image by using flag pins and I photographed the images again;
- I obtained a final image through these digital steps;

This photographic process was intended to prove how simple the idea of copyright can be diluted. But, at the same time, the process kept the questioning open through the transparence of the images. There is no difference between Internet and another real world. The world comes to me through Internet. So, this is the real world I see through my camera.
Every image produced has a double educational signification: tool of discovery and tool of questioning.

During this creative process I guided myself by ideas like: simplicity and accuracy of visual language, cohabitation of things, and interrogative contrast. So, the final product is a visual transparent and interrogative composition of three things forced to live together in contrast.

In fact, by creating this type of visual of the human attitude my intention was to open an interrogation on the destiny of today's education. By making use of flag pins in postmodern style I suggested the pseudo-revolutionary aspect of the time we live in. I mean by this a new kind of military spirit across the world, marked by an aesthetic appearance and imposed irresponsibly.


Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

Every image of this process can be seen as a deconstruction of the hyperreality that is everyday constructed on Flickr. The image as sign 'doesn't encode reality, but rather constructs it.' (Danesi, 2007, p. 69) Every image illustrates two moments of life:
- the time of childhood and play;
- the time of adulthood and responsibility;

The child puts into question the adult life, his finality; the adult puts into question the inoculated desire of the child. The photography is a very complex sign that 'shape us in every way imaginable.' (Danessi, 2007, p. 69) As a sign, it is an integrant part of hypermedia system.

Into this context, the image plays the role of the icon included in icon ad infinitum. The danger does not lie in this incommensurable visual potential but in our attitudes, intentions, and actions.

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea
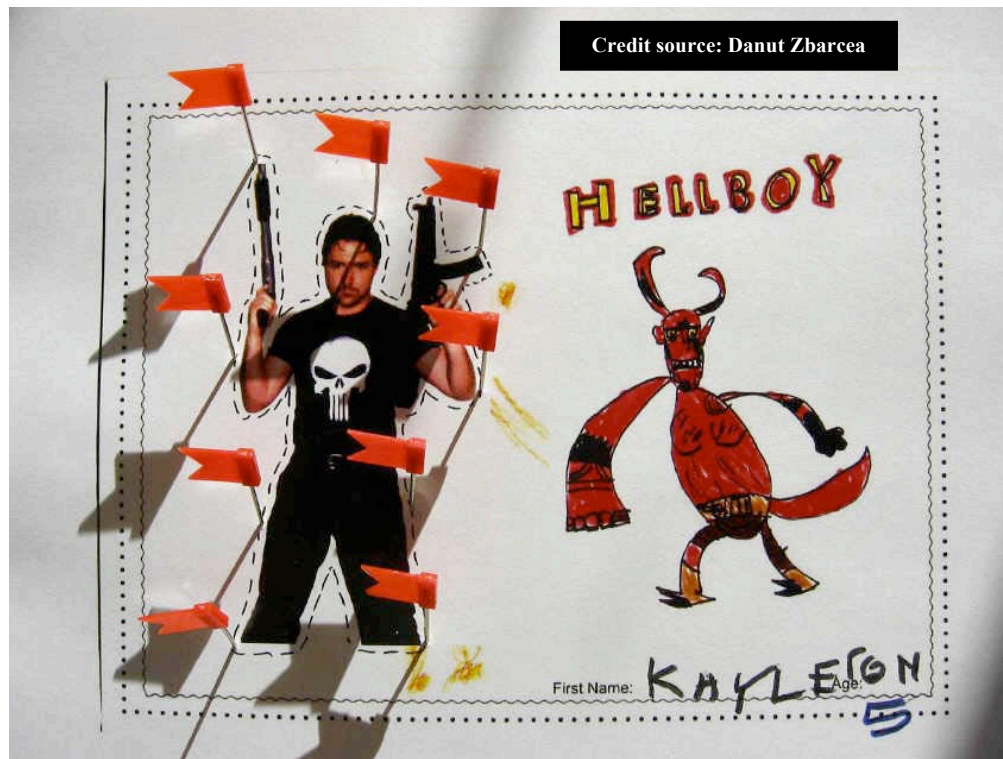
So, the questioning of the human attitude is the target of this project.

VII. Goals
   By doing this research my intention was to create a multiquestionning on:
   - the process of visual creation,
   - the content of this process,
   - the contradictory aspects of visual contemporary education.

   The internal structure of the project was also guided by two general aspects of the contemporary paradoxical environment:

1. Instantaneity
   When talking about structure, Derrida expressed the idea that 'the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it.' (Derrida, 1978, p. 278-294) By extrapolating this I can suggest that traveling in hypermedia one can find oneself situated in the centre and at the periphery at the same time. I called this feeling the syndrome of intersection. Facing this paradoxical reality, we (as inventors of the electronic highway) are reflected into this world while we imitate it like a chameleon. Our mind becomes similar to an ideological computer that creates confusion between the world of thought and the real world. (Deshimaru, 1993, p. 144)

Credit source: Danut Zbarcea

2. The contradictory state of education

The fact that human knowledge seems to evolve paradoxically and synchronically doesn't mean anything new today. The new aspect of this evolution is represented by hypermedia as an ecstatic place, marked by the inalterable and repetitive human attitudes of fear, violence, infantilism, and intolerance. Fascinated to find ourselves in between, we cannot decide which way to go. We are trapped between two confused realities that make us see that there is no parallel between the evolution of the progress and the development of culture. (Finkelkraut, 1997, p. 183)

VIII. Conclusion

If I'll send them to the new school (…) what they will learn will have the same value of what will they forget? Cheik Hamidou Kane

The desensitization of the desensitized image as artistic, visual and educational strategy doesn't represent a pretext.

1. Talking about violence and metaphorical sickness represents the subversive part of the project. By aesthetically deconstructing and reconstructing of hypermedia's visual information, I intended to question the contradictory aspects of today's visual education. In fact, the project sustains the idea of relearning to see. This means redefining the tool of reflection that can facilitate the escape from the prison of everyday's fiction.

How will it be possible to develop a multifaceted understanding? By learning, maybe, to recognize the error that marks the process of knowledge and self-knowledge.

      2. The goal of the entire project was inventing artistic procedures that can sustain an educational discourse. Every image produced is a means of manipulation. So, the photography doesn't represent an absolute truth. Looking at an image doesn't also mean seeing, understanding or trusting. Today, the digital image became a self-referential reality. Our reality became a self-referential reality. In order to understand it we have to deconstruct the errors first. Accepting this truth could be a starting point of a visual artistic strategy for secondary and post-secondary level.

There are a few simple principles that can be part of this strategy:
- visual education has to be an open, integrative, transformative, dynamic and critical process, based on universal human values ;
- the visual education process has to facilitate the development of perceptual habits that can help students to make distinctions and understand the difference between us. 'The pictorial images should extend the vision of the viewer.' (Lester, 2003, p. 21)
- the pedagogical aim has to focus on 'slowing down the reception of the image, to encourage prolonged contemplation of perceptual fields.' (Grønstad, 2006, para 2)
- the visual education process has to develop a way of thinking based on the spirit of the ecology of the real and the vision at the same time; this can help students to become more aware in regards to the impact of the visual on human attitude; 'The pedagogy also has to be understood as a political and moral practice rather than a technical strategy.' (Giroux, 2000, para 33)
- the visual education process has to keep open the questioning about the validity of this kind of visual artistic process.

In conclusion, my project is no more than a simple warning against perceptual blindness.

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