

SELF-EXPLORATION THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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DISSERTATION – PHOTOGRAPHY

(6AD002)

09/01/2017

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

COPY: 1

PAGES: 19

WORDS COUNT: 5634

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“Cameras know everything and are able to do everything in a universe that was programmed in advance for this knowledge and ability. (...) To be in the photographic universe means to experience, to know and to evaluate the world as a function of photographs. Every single experience, every single bit of knowledge, every single value can be reduced to individually known and evaluated photographs.” (Flusser, 2000, p.68-70)

This dissertation will explore the ideas of identity, self-discovery, self-exploration and understanding of the world, through the means of photography. These ideologies will be defined using the notion of street photography as a *‘theatre of human activity’* (Brougher, Ferguson, 2001) and self-portraiture including its performative side as defined by authors such as Richard Brilliant or Shearer West.

While using key texts described above that focus on the concept of self-exploration through photography, other consideration will be given to Ralph Hattersley’s *‘Discover Yourself Through Photography’* where he studies the idea that photographers use their work as a mean of coping with reality, as well as the psychological study book *‘Exploring the Self through Photography’* written by Claire Craig, a further exploration of the notions such as self-identity will be discovered. The idea that we observe others to understand them and find our own place between them and that being in certain spaces we feel close to, is a *“central experience of being-in-the-world”* as Professor Deborah Lupton (1998, p.152) suggested will also be examined further. Artists such as Jo Spence or Cindy Sherman, who explored their own identity through portraiture, reveal how the photographer can identify themselves through their work. Eugène Atget and Dorothea Lange whilst focusing on street photography offer a similar approach of identifying the photographer’s identity through their work.

Photography is a powerful means that can capture the reality in front of it and allow its mechanist (the photographer) to navigate it in a way that will help them to understand what is in front of them. We, as humans, are always eager to explore ourselves and the world around us. Whether a photograph is taken of the street full of people, or the artist photographs themselves, every single image contains the photographer’s identity.

"Photography as a process, in both public and personal use, is one of the customs of our society. (...) the set of social interactions that come under the heading of photographing have the quality of a ritual. As a ritual they can be the subject of a kind of social-anthropological study." (Beloff, 1985, p.205) Photographers are scientists that use their sense of seeing to learn and understand. Photography captures the world and creates a meaning that allows the photographer to understand what is in front of them better.

Photographers often try to understand the world and themselves through the images they take and, as Martin Parr (2002) suggested, the living fascinates them, and they use photography as an exercising into looking at themselves. The photographer is a loner, a wanderer who wants to understand others to be able to get closer to understanding oneself. The photographer is a sociologist that is curious of the world and human presence, always watching and capturing, as *'a collector of faces'*. Dorothea Lange (1940) believed that her work and work of other documentary photographers can help the viewer, and the artist themselves, with understanding our society and ourselves. Artists have a desire to witness reality, a desire to see. All of us can sometimes turn into sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers. We try to explore ourselves by observing the people and events around us to further investigate what we already know about our own identities. It is because, to be able to understand and accept ourselves, we need to realise that we are part of something bigger, we are not on our own. To do so, we must understand and accept the differences between humans which allow us to realise that being different is not wrong, that we are all different and that what makes us who we are, who we really are. (Billington et al., 1998) Sigmund Freud (1911) believed that we find pleasure in looking at others and ourselves. He identified the idea of *'auto-erotic satisfaction'* that happens in the early stages of life where an infant uses their own body *'as an object of the look'* and later develops the interest in voyeurism for the pleasure of *'an object other than itself'*. We observe ourselves and others to understand what we already know by linking the similarities and differences.

Pointing a camera at something means we are analysing it. By creating self-portraiture, the artist analyses themselves. Whereas, the attention given through the camera to strangers on the street allows the artist to realise their attractions and interests, and therefore their own personality. *"The camera can be a means of learning to understand people and of recording what you have understood in its fullest dimension."* (Hattersley, 1971, p.67)

Photographing means learning what is captured in hope of understanding the perception that is in front of us. Seeing is knowing, and the camera allows us to see more therefore allowing us to explore, learn and understand the world that is in front of us and reflect on our place in it. (Stimson, Kelsey, 2008)

Photography is a process, whether in public or personal use, that is one of the main customs of our society. (Beloff, 1985, p.205) Photography, in a way, works as a note taking process where creating allows us to engage, explore and expand our knowledge. It creates the new world, while simultaneously capturing the real, making people start questioning their perspective pushing them to want and explore, to be able to understand. (Sontag, 2002) If you learn to see a photograph, you learn to see the world. *"... looking at images of others engages our own sense of self, whether consciously or unconsciously."* (Bate, 2009, p.82)

Looking back at the images you have taken, whether your physical presence is visible in them or not, further enables you to explore the things you did not realise about yourself. Analysing an image is analysing the person that took the photograph. If the photographer physically appears in the image, the features and personality characteristics can be captured. If the photographer captured others, their emotion, beliefs and perception are visible in the photograph. You can notice negative characteristics and even allow yourself to change for the better as photography can be a way of self-development and a way of discovering and identifying oneself. Observing others can help us reflect on our own choices and our place as part of the human society. *"In looking at your photographs later you can usually remember the things you tried to obscure, eliminate or diminish."* (Hattersley, 1971, p.53) This statement suggests that we purposely manipulate our images during the making, to unconsciously hide the characteristics we dislike, yet the camera captures them nevertheless. We can act in front of the camera and in front of people; however, the camera can record the vulnerable moments in between the act. Psychological evidence based on Claire Craig's (2010) work described in *'Exploring the Self through Photography'* suggests that we often press the trigger without thinking about it. We capture an image, before we realise that we want to photograph what is in front of us. We create photographs unconsciously, the eyes see through the lens what was unseen without it, the brain sends the impulse to the finger and the trigger is pressed before we know it.

In the research project '*Self-Portraiture and Future: An Examination of a Photographer's Creative Identity*' written by Luciana Vasques Barbosa (2011), the researcher points out the importance of photography as a way of helping people with becoming more aware of who they are. He examines the idea of photographic image as a reflective practice that attracts the ones with a desire of self-knowledge. The text concludes that the passion of wanting to understand people makes us want to photograph them to be able to explore their identities, and that passion leads to photographic self-portraiture as a way of seeking one's identity.

Photography, as a medium, allows the artist to express and share a part of their identity with the world. Self-portraits are most common way of allocating your identity.

However, whether the image is of the photographer themselves or the world in front of them, a certain style will eventually be identified. Even if a photographer only captures other people in their images, in the end, they will come to the realisation that all the images have a common ground which allows the artist to look at their interest. This enables them to learn something new about their own identity, in a similar way that Geoff Dyer incidentally found his interest in hats. (Dyer, 2007) The certain fascinations that one may be unaware before analysing their photographs suggests that the world in the photograph is the real one, yet is created by the photographer themselves, further demonstrating that a part of artist's identity can always be distinguished in the work they create. "*The expression of the artist (...) the inventory of a changing self-image*" (Kelly, 1979, p.2) can be found in every image they take. The artist can hide or try to show their best, but the camera will record none of it. It will capture the real, leaving the artist with fascination and disbelief of their own selves. Photographing oneself is photographing the world around us, and photographing the world around us reflects the real self. The images created can be seen as a metaphor of the world we live in as our identity is in the picture even if we are not physically present in it. "... *photography provides ways of viewing the world that are otherwise unavailable to human vision.*" (Wilson, 2012, p.62) To be able to understand ourselves, we must be able to see the real us. To be able to see it, we must feel the need to observe it, not look at it. Observe it, see it, and understand it. We are able to find out more about our external as well as internal identity from the photographs we take as they open our eyes wider empowering us with the knowledge that we seek.

An artist's identity can be seen in all the images they take, and photography enables for self-exploration. The photographs of the streets can be just as powerful as the self-portraits created in the studio. Places inspire feelings and make us emotional, making a person want to explore them. Photographers often chose the streets as their subject as a mean of exploration of their own feelings and identity. Photographs of the streets often reveal reality we dismissed which helps the photographer identify their own self within the place, and within the society. Street photographers are captivated by the beauty of the street and the people that create the identity for the street, which absorbs them into another world; the world that these streets and people belong to, the world that the artists themselves want to understand. *"Although the situation is innocuous, the image itself is ambiguous in an unsettling way. Emotions this paradoxical are glimpsed only deep within the self, where the landscape is symbolic rather than actual. It is the psyche, as much as the street, that speaks to us here."* (Westerbeck, Meyerowitz, 1994, p.156) It is about knowing and understanding oneself and others, rather than about the street itself. The space is not the focus; the space is nothing without the people. The people create an identity for the space allowing the photographer to observe, evaluate and understand others and therefore be closer to understanding themselves. (Roberts, 2014) Photographing the streets is capturing the real, the everyday. It is capturing the people in the natural acts, as they really are. Street photography is a realistic representation of the world and the reflection of our own existence in this world. Street photographers often point out that *"they take pictures as a way of trying to understand the world we live in."* (McLaren, Howarth, 2011, p.10) This proves that to be able to cope with the reality, one needs to capture it, observe it and understand it. Dorothea Lange was one of the photographers that decided to discard her studio and go out on the streets and photograph the people of the world. She believed that *"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."* (Lange, 1960) And she decided to learn about, what was going on around her.

Dorothea Lange, who's most famous piece of work is '*Migrant Mother*' (FIGURE 1) that captures the life of other people during the Depression-era, started out as a commercial photographer in a small studio in New York. However, she slowly became bored of the structured, staged images. When the Depression started, she was unable to sit inside the studio and pretend as if nothing was going on.

She went out on the streets and started photographing the people and how the difficult times affected them. She used photography as a way of coping with reality and a way of understanding what was happening around her. Lange photographed others to learn about them, about the world around them and about her own place in it. (Davis, 1995) Lange chose to abandon the studio lifestyle as she said *"I knew that if my interests in people were valid, I would not only be doing what was in those printing frames (...) I was compelled to photograph as a direct respond to what was around me."* (Lange, 1952)

The *'Migrant Mother'* is portraiture of a woman aged thirty-two that was part of an agricultural worker's family. The Depression deeply affected people like the *Migrant Mother*. In the photograph, the woman's facial expression tells us everything about the situation. It can be seen how troubled she is. The wrinkles on her face seem to be new, as if the situation she is in aged her within a moment. The deep gaze suggests she is deep in thoughts and the body language highlights there are problems she does not necessarily want to talk about, hence why her face is moved away from the camera and her sight is focused on the side. The two children hanging onto her shoulders are turned away from the camera, as if they are turning away from the world and the harsh reality they are living in. They are hanging onto the woman as if she was their bodyguard, they know she will protect them. Their assurance in her is possibly one of the main reasons for her worries, as they trust in her whereas she herself is unsure of the future and does not know whether she will be able to protect them. The baby she is holding in her arms is calm, unaware of the struggles. All the children create an even more powerful image of the woman, highlighting the importance of her struggles, simultaneously presenting the viewer with a powerful image of a woman who will do anything to protect the ones she loves. Dorothea Lange was observing the world around her, deciding to capture this particular woman. The image of a troubled yet strong female that is presented to the viewer is most likely the image Lange saw in the woman. *'Migrant Mother'*'s persona was created based on the observation and the reality in front of the artist's eyes.

Dorothea Lange photographed the woman to be closer to her, to try to understand her and the struggles she was going through. Empathy was a driving force of her work. (Ohrn, 1980) She was able to find a positive character in all the negativity that was happening at the time. Is it possible that Lange saw a piece of her own self in the woman?

Or maybe, she saw a piece of herself in the children? Whether Lange viewed her own self as a powerful, troubled woman or a vulnerable, young being, she was able to come closer to the realisation about her own self, her identity and her place in the society after capturing the people on the streets, including the so-called '*Migrant Mother*' as her work tells a story of other people, as well as her own personal journey. (Ohrn, 1980, p.220-223)

The famous French flaneur Eugène Atget also used street photography as a way of exploration. However, his tactics were different as he focused the traces of humanity and the lack of human presence rather than focusing on the people. Atget's main pieces of work such as '*Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyeres*' or '*Corner of rue de Seine and rue de L'Échaudé*' are of empty streets of Paris. He used street photography that characterises by a certain composition, to allow people in, into his photographs, into his world. By photographing the empty spaces, he used photography and the idea of isolation as a way of understanding humans as individuals, as a way of understanding his own individuality. Atget documented the streets as a reminder of the past. His photographs are striking to this day, because the spirit of the streets can be visible. "*The everyday life in the street that his photographs reveal is his own. The human experience to which they make us privy is the one that he himself had while wandering Paris...*" (Westerbeck, Meyerowitz, 1994, p.111) The photographs are the artist's journey. They reflect the emotions and struggles of the artist. His photograph '*Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyeres*' (FIGURE 2) from 1899 suggests exactly that. The photograph focuses on the empty street, the architecture and the lack of obvious human presence. The main road acts as a leading line, inviting the viewer for a walk, inviting the viewer for a journey alongside the artist. This particular photograph, indeed, indicates the photographer's emotions and the drive for self-exploration. The road is a metaphor for the journey of life, Atget wandered around the city as if looking for something, looking for his own place within the city, looking for his own identity.

The street in the '*Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyeres*' seems soulless, but simultaneously full of life, empty, yet full of life and existence. People can be visible in the far background, as if the artist was too scared to come closer and disturb them, the way a hunter is afraid to come too close to disturb their victim. Atget observed and captured his 'victims' as a way of becoming closer to understanding them and figuring out his own place between them. Fascinatingly, there is a human presence noticeable in the foreground of the image.

However, the people in the photographed are blurred, obviously moving when the image was taken. The movement highlights the idea of moving forward, they are there, but are not fully themselves. The people photographed seem more like traces of humanity rather than actual humans. Atget captured the idea of belonging without being fully aware of your own self perfectly in this image. This suggests that, even though many could argue, Eugène Atget used street photography as a way of capturing the human presence to explore humans and become closer to understanding himself through the journey he took upon his shoulders. *"Atget's work reflects to a large degree his biography (...) there are also the quiet, empty parks that reflect perhaps his loneliness he felt as an old man."* (Westerbeck, Meyerowitz, 1994, p.15) Eugène Atget used street photography as a personal journey towards his real self. He photographed the empty spaces to emphasize his emotions and worries. He photographed the streets to leave a legacy of his own identity behind. Atget, similarly to Lange, were able to create photographs of themselves without physically appearing in their images.

Self-portraiture can be just as a powerful mean of the artist's identity and a way of self-exploration, in that photographs created of photographers by the photographers present the viewer not only with the physical appearance of the artist, but also their real identity, whether intentional or not.

Self-portraits are more than just images of a person, *"they have the allure of a private diary, in that they seem to give us an artist's insight into his or her own personality."* (West, 2004, p.163) Self-portraits are not just simple images of the photographer, but an invitation into the photographer's life; an invitation to their head and heart. The self-portraits act as self-examination and a way of expressing one's deepest thoughts and emotions.

Photographers often capture themselves in their own work to be able to see themselves from a different perspective, to be able to notice something they were unaware of before. The images act as a reflection that is often surprising, enabling the artist to notice something new every time. Self-portraiture is the most intimate artwork as it shows the whole person, opening up to others and, most important, to themselves. Self-portraits are autobiographical pieces that help the artist to understand themselves better; the work is created for the artist rather than the viewer.

From painters through sculptors to photographers, various artists portrayed themselves in their own work, creating artwork of themselves, by themselves and for themselves. (West, 2004)

One of the most famous photographers that constantly perform in front of the camera is Cindy Sherman. Sherman is a conceptual artist that, over the year portrayed numerous characters in her artworks. She used the camera to invent characters and situations she observed in the real world. Her photographs (and films) are a way of recreating what observed to explore what is yet understood. Sherman used a camera as a tool for seeing the real within the fictional. The artist creates her own world through photography to be able to cope and explore the real world around her. She often portrayed extremely realistic characters, to understand them better and be able to relate, be able to find her own identity within the characters she created. The roles and people Sherman portrays in her work have *"been seen as testing the sense of self that everyone possesses. Some have taken this as evidence of personal exploration."* (Moorhouse, 2014, p.10)

Sherman often does not give personalised titles to her work to allow the viewer to decide on the title, on the meaning of the work. Her work '*Untitled #479*' (FIGURE 3) is one of her early works. In this piece, the artist recreates the whole idea of creating a character. The artwork contains of numerous photographs, each being the step after the previous one. Sherman changes herself from one character into a next one using wardrobe change and make up, and each step is being documented by the camera. In each of the photographs, the artist is looking straight into the camera. The use of direct gaze is intentional as it makes the work that more personal. The viewer is able to look straight into Sherman's eyes, while looking at someone other than Cindy Sherman herself. The artist is recognizable in only 3-4 images that document the change between one persona onto the other. These couple of photographs seem the most significant of all as they are the ones where the artist is most vulnerable, she is showing her real self while trying to convince the viewer she is someone else. This piece of work is a way of self-exploration. Sherman portrays other characters to try and find her own identity. Possibly, she is trying to look for clues within the personas she creates, trying to identify the links between the roles she plays and her own self.

Psychologists point out that Sherman's work signals *"a need to identify herself within a scene"* (Moorhouse, 2014, p.15), it evidences her need to explore herself.

The artist uses costumes and makes up to find her real self within the characters she portrays. She used '*Untitled #479*' as a way of re-exploring herself and a way of encouraging the viewer to think about the complexities of life, society, and their own self. Sherman's work is an incredible example of using performance to understand oneself and, simultaneously, help others in finding their own identity.

Another artist that used self-portraiture as a way of self-exploration is Jo Spence. Throughout the years of practice, Spence looked back at her family albums, documented others and even performed in front of the camera as a way of trying to understand who she really was. However, Jo Spence's most famous work are the photographs where she documented herself as she was. Her '*The Picture of Health?*' project became the pioneer project to phototherapy and using self-portraiture photography as a way of understanding one's identity. From her previous experience with documentary photography, Spence understood that people act in the real world, but are unable to act 'normal' in front of the camera, she knew that the camera is able to capture the reality that cannot be seen outside of the image. To be able to come in terms with her illness and identity, she used self-portraiture as a way of exploring who she was and who she was becoming, trying to understand what role she plays in the spectacle called 'society'.

One of the photographs from '*The Picture of Health?*' (FIGURE 4) is a straight portraiture. The artist is not smiling; she maintains a neutral expression, looking straight into the camera. There is no performance; there are no lies within the image. Spence is presenting herself to the viewer, exactly as she is, even though; the artist herself has no idea who she is supposed to be. The photograph documents her struggles with cancer and how losing a breast influences, not only her physical appearance, but her overall identity as a woman and as a human. The text written on her breast says 'Property of Jo Spence?'. The question mark is the most significant part of the whole photograph, as it highlights her struggle with her own identity. Until this point, Spence believed that her body makes her a woman, that her appearance is part of her identity and she is the one in charge of it. Unfortunately, due to external factors, she is about to lose that power over her body, the power over her identity. The text signifies her need to re-explore herself, the need to understand who she really is, who and where she belongs. The photograph is a talisman, a reminder of her belonging, a reminder of her own identity. (Spence, 1988)

Jo Spence's change of circumstances created a massive impact not only on her physical, but also on her mental health. She was unable to cope with what was happening; therefore, she decided to use photography as a way of coping with the reality and re-exploration of her own identity. The artist believed that the real should be explored visually to be fully understood. She photographed herself to explore and understand her own feelings. Jo Spence captured reality within her work, recreating real feelings and emotion as a way of self-exploration.

Spence, similarly to Sherman, photographed herself as a way of exploring herself. Atget or Lange photographed others to be able to understand their own selves. However, even though they were not physically in the work they created, their photographs are as much self-portraits as the images created by Spence and Sherman. Street photographers and photographers that do not point the camera at their own self, are all creating work that reflects their own feelings, beliefs and identity. Therefore, it can be argued that their photographs, containing the identity of the artist, are indeed self-portraits. The camera is one with the photographer, the camera is the photographer therefore the image captured by the camera reflects the capturer. The photograph doesn't show the world in front of it, but the person behind it. The photographer creates the photographs to share a part of their own selves with the world. Photographing oneself is photographing the world around us, and photographing the world around us is, photographing ourselves. Looking back at the images we create allows us to look back at who we are and what our perception of the world looks like, further enabling self-exploration. *"Any artist's work has been envisaged as the mirror of his experiences, thoughts and ideas."* (Nedelcu, Nedelcu, 2012, p.1)

Photographers use the camera as a mirror, photographing their exterior and interior, capturing their real emotions, perceptions, and experiences, allowing themselves to notice and understand those.

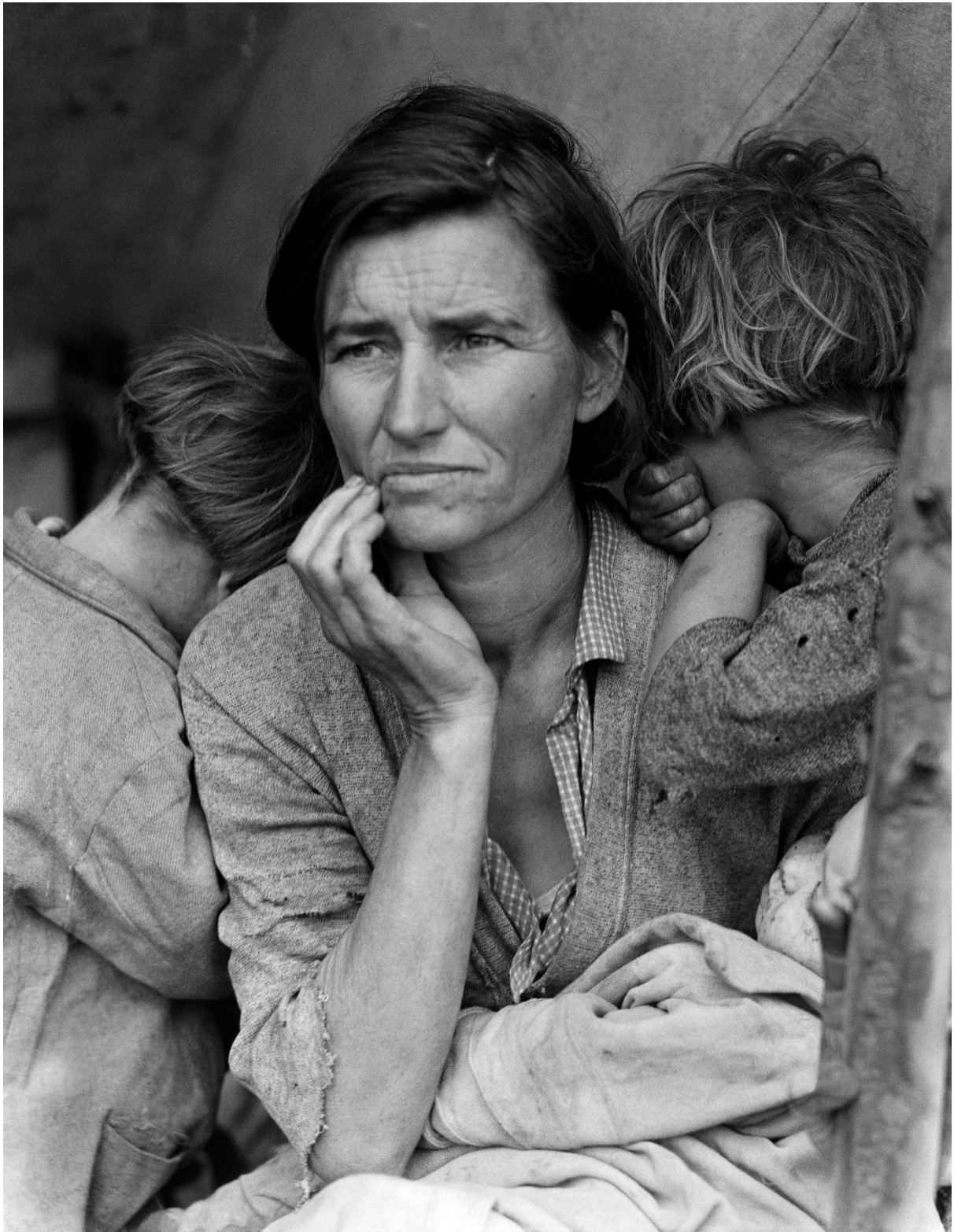
Whether a photograph is taken of the photographer themselves, or whether the artist goes out on the streets to photograph strangers, all the images created reflect the person's real identity and enable for self-exploration. The self-portraits taken in the studio, and the street photograph taken at a location, are all craven by the idea of exploring your own self and finding your place in the world.

Both, portraiture, and street photography, focus on capturing the real people, highlighting the visible that is unnoticeable by the eye of the everyday. Both preserve and register the people that are unknown and seem irrelevant.

Humans want to be perceived as more than just their looks or occupation. Every single one of us wants to be seen as a person, as an individual. However, it is impossible to be perceived as the real us if we ourselves are not fully aware of who we are, hence people's interest in sociology and psychology that is shared by many photographers. Many people try to explore themselves and photography is one of the mediums to do so, as it allows the artist to see themselves from a different perspective, capturing parts of their own identity they were not previously aware of.

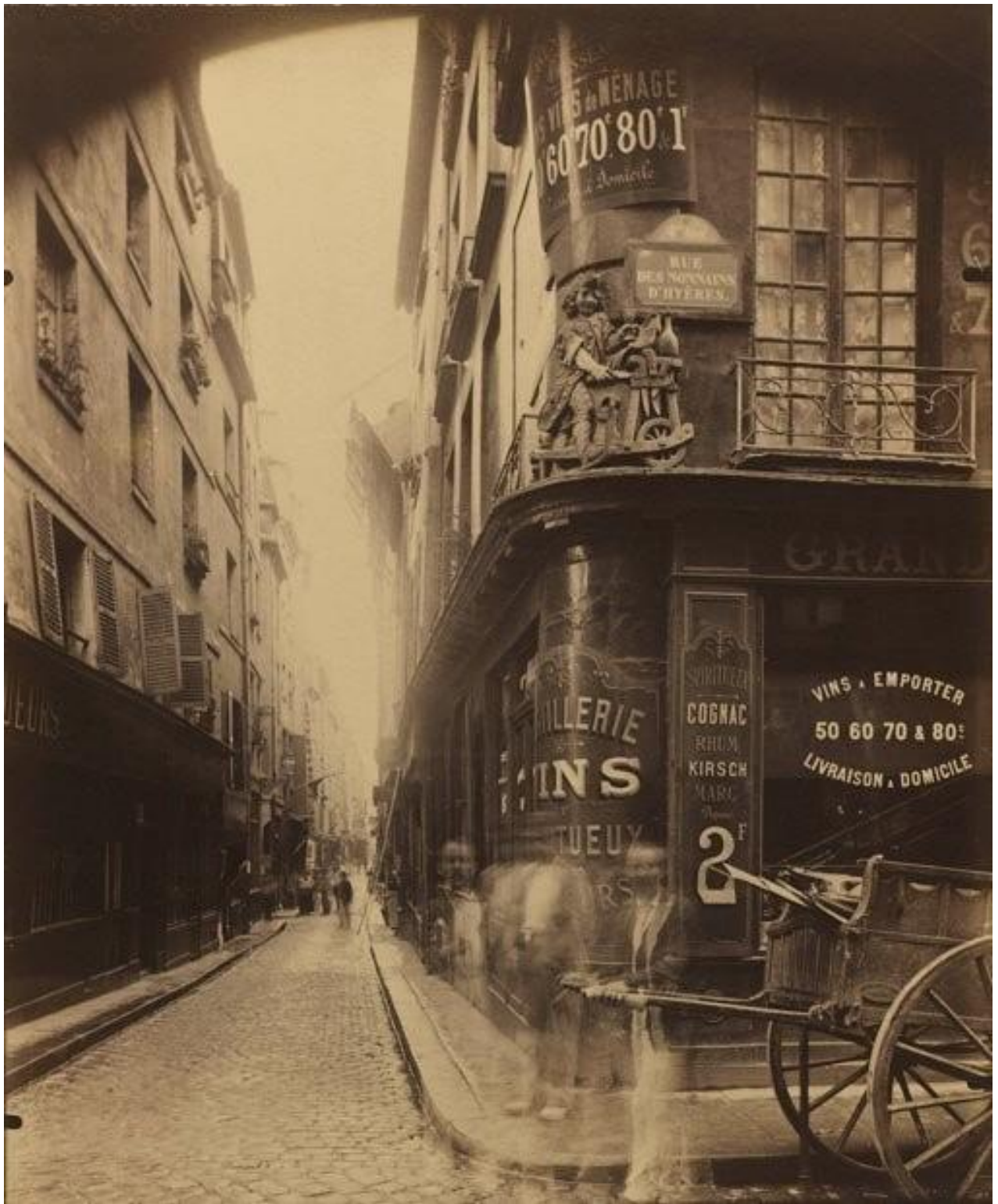
To conclude, photography can be practised in various ways and for various reasons. Nevertheless, the artists are all looking for similar answers, trying to understand themselves and the world around them, using photography as a way of learning. Photography is a realistic representation of the world and a reflection of our own existence. We use photography to represent ourselves in the human culture, and represent the human culture's impact on ourselves, to highlight who we are, while simultaneously trying to understand our own purpose. The passion of wanting to understand the world makes us want to photograph it to become closer to the answers about our existence. We photograph ourselves and the world around us to rediscover it and explore it further. Photography helps us communicate with the world and our inner selves. Photography can help one rediscover their past and their present, helping to make sense of it all and therefore enable to explore it. If you understand the world you photograph, you are closer to understanding your own self which allows you to try and change what you believe is wrong with yourself, and the world. However, to be able to create the work that explores others and ourselves, one must feel the need to see through the camera rather than just look through it. Photographers that capture themselves and the world with the means of trying to look for answers, will try and see the world through the lens, rather than look at the world through the lens. (Barbosa, 2011) This skill comes from the unconscious of the artists that photograph for themselves, photograph to explore, learn, and understand. The world. The people. Themselves.

FIGURE 1



Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, California, March 1936;

FIGURE 2



Eugene Atget, Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyerès, Paris, 1899;

FIGURE 3



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #479, 1975;

FIGURE 4



Jo Spence, Terry Dennett, *The Picture of Health?*, 1982-86;

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