

**PHOTOGRAPHS, WORDS AND A SURREALIST GAME:
DEVisING A VISUAL LITERACY METHODOLOGY IN A
UNIVERSITY OF THIRD AGE**

ALFREDO BRANT

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7524-8500>
alfredobrant@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Universities of the Third Age first emerged in France in the 1970s. With the aim of promoting active and healthy ageing, this educational and social initiative offers accessible courses for older people. In this article, we present and analyze a case study of a photography workshop held at the Universidade Alcântara Senior [Alcântara Senior University] in Lisbon, which was designed and conducted by the author. Drawing on the participants' relationship with the urban space of a city undergoing significant spatial and structural changes, the article examines the specific pedagogical methodology devised for this initiative, discussing the outcomes of the collective work produced by the participants. The aim is to grasp elements of the group's visuality and explore how they can raise awareness of conflicts in urban spaces. We conclude that an approach to visual literacy through photographic practices holds great potential for addressing the concerns of older adults regarding the use, perception, and enjoyment of urban space.

KEYWORDS: University of Third Age; Visual Literacy; Surrealism; Photographic Pedagogy; Urban Space; Lisbon.

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO 2020) defines ‘healthy ageing’ as a set of functional abilities and intrinsic capacities that provide people with well-being and quality of life in correlation with their surrounding environment. Assuming that everyone has the right to a long and fulfilling life, the focus of healthy ageing should be on creating conditions that enable older people to achieve their potential. Therefore, healthy ageing is not only about having good physical and mental health, but also about each individual’s autonomy and active participation in society. In this sense, lifelong learning represents a powerful means of improving the well-being among older people.

Lifelong learning “is a process that starts at birth and extends across the whole lifespan. It provides people of all ages and backgrounds with learning opportunities and activities that respond to their specific needs at different stages of life and in their professional development” (UNESCO 2025). Also known as continuous learning, it provides individuals with the tools to navigate the digital transition and engage with their communities, supporting health and well-being. It is particularly beneficial for ageing societies due to its capacity to promote active ageing.

Regardless of age, the learning process stimulates the development of individuals’ functional capacities. For instance, acquiring new knowledge can improve decision-making and communication skills. As an activity that can be carried out collectively, learning also helps to construct and maintain social life. By enabling individuals to become more actively involved in issues of common interest, the continuous learning process contributes to the development of society as a whole. Therefore, learning is an activity that goes beyond formal education, which is based on a structured system, often involving certifications and diplomas.

The cognitive processes stimulated by learning also favour the intrinsic capacities of human beings. Functions of the sensory system, such as hearing and vision, are constantly in demand, as well as the mental capacities of memory, creativity and the act thinking itself. Ultimately, learning provides the basis for individuals’ self-realisation. The concept of self-realisation involves the conscious control of oneself and is developed through psychocognitive modes of thinking, as well as intuition and feeling. According to Ruso (2019), educational spaces can only promote self-realisation if they encourage autonomous personal development, openness to diverse experiences and personal involvement in actions that reflect

moral and humanistic values. Due to this potential, learning activities such as courses, classes, workshops and training sessions are an effective in promoting healthy ageing. Within this wide range of possibilities, the Universities of Third Age (hence the international acronym U3A, which will be used throughout the article) fulfil an important socio-cultural role within the context of ageing, in different societies and geographies.

This article describes a pedagogical experiment that was carried out between January and July 2025 at the Universidade Alcântara Senior [Alcântara Senior University] in Lisbon, Portugal, and analyses its results. The activity in question was a photography workshop involving the documentation of urban spaces. Using concepts from the discipline of visual literacy, we evaluated the potential of the devised pedagogical activity through two approaches. Firstly, in terms of achieving one of the objectives of the U3A movement, i.e., promoting the active participation of the seniors in society. Secondly, in terms of its ability to foster the self-realisation of the participants as autonomous individuals. Finally, we analyse the knowledge production contribution associated with a collective and collaborative project developed by the participants and presented at the end of the workshop.

2. Research question and methodology

Our main research question is how visual literacy strategies can strengthen the local community, both by raising awareness of urban issues and by promoting well-being. This question is driven by our goal of developing innovative pedagogical methods that integrate creative practices and civic engagement. Additionally, our aim is to explore the use of photography as a tool for achieving a deeper understanding of the issues involved in urban transformation processes of a traditional Lisbon neighbourhood and its impact on the senior population. To this end, we used an art-based research methodology involving a practical activity, from which we extracted and analysed qualitative data.

Broadly defined, ‘art-based research’ is a methodology that uses the arts in the broadest sense to explore, understand, represent and give meaning to human actions and experiences (Greenwood 2019). This approach has two main implications. Firstly, it involves active collaboration and dialogue between the researcher-artist and the participants, typically through immersive experiences.

Secondly, these investigations aim to achieve positive transformation at the individual, community, or societal level.

Art-based methodologies open up a wide range of possibilities for qualitative research. The most visible of these are when ‘artist-researchers’ use theoretical tools to inform their artistic practice within an academic framework. In our case, however, it is a ‘research-artist’ who carries out artistic actions to support a qualitative enquiry. This form of art-based research does not necessarily involve the creation of new artwork by the researcher, but rather the articulation of artistic experiences. In this role, the ‘research-artist’ acts as a mediator to facilitate the production of knowledge through artistic experiences within a group, institution, or community (Finley 2008; Wang et al. 2017).

Our study employed critical observation of the processes unfolding during an artistic-pedagogical activity, followed by interpretative analysis of the results. Through this protocol, the study fosters a dialogue between theory and practice in the fields of visual culture and visual literacy. Additionally, the participants completed a short questionnaire to evaluate the workshop. While the answers are not relevant in statistical terms, they provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the initiative in terms of social engagement and self-realisation.

3. U3A: broad outlines and social function

Population ageing is a global demographic trend that poses social and economic challenges for institutions and government leaders. According to the World Health Organization, the current pace of population ageing is much faster than in the past. Between 2015 and 2050, it is estimated that the proportion of the world’s population over 60 years of age will increase from 12% to 22%, reaching 2.1 billion people (World Health Organization 2020). Over the past forty years, organisations such as the UN, WHO, OECD and UNESCO have developed policies for older people, and this global situation has created favourable conditions for the development of U3A. Therefore, in the current context, the social relevance of U3A is particularly important.

Despite the differences in models, U3A of different regions and countries follow similar objectives with regard to their social function. Ageing is a natural and irreversible process that affects everyone (Alves 2025). Old age brings greater physical vulnerability and fragile health, as well as affecting individuals

cognitively, sensorially and emotionally. Therefore, ‘healthy ageing’ or ‘active ageing’ depends on actions that promote physical and mental health among the older population. This includes promoting a favourable environment, cultivating quality social and family relationships, maintaining a healthy lifestyle throughout life, and encouraging intellectual and cultural activities.

U3As are organisations that primarily seek to promote the autonomy and dignity of older people, and to encourage their participation in society. The assistance they provide is generally educational and ultimately aims to improve the quality of life of senior individuals¹. Therefore, U3A participants are mainly driven by the desire to remain active and autonomous, as well as to socialise and participate in community life. It should be noted that, here, learning is not linked to economic necessity as it is during the working lives of most people. Instead, this process is governed by the freedom to choose what is best for oneself.

4. Case study: The UAS context and the reimagining the city workshop

Founded in 2009, the Alcântara Senior University (UAS) is located in the western part of Lisbon, in the Alcântara neighbourhood. Administered by the local parish council, this U3A plays an important role in community life by organising various events around its activities. It currently offers around 40 subjects, taught by a group of 35 volunteer teachers. This educational programme is characterised by the diversity of options, including practical, theoretical and technical courses, as well as physical activities. The UAS offers courses in five thematic areas: 1. Art and Physical Activity; 2. Human, Social and Life Sciences; 3. History and Heritage; 4. Languages and 5. Technologies. Popular courses include foreign languages, digital literacy, art history, drawing and painting, and subjects addressing the history of Portugal or the city of Lisbon.

The photographic workshop ‘Reimagining the City – Word & Image’ took place from January to March 2025. It explored the relationship between people and their territory, focusing on how these spaces are perceived. The weekly two-hour meetings took place in a room at the Alcântara municipal library. Of the seven participants, only one did not live in the parish, but knew the area very well, having

¹ The participation of older adults in U3A activities seems to increase their physical, intellectual, and social outcomes (Formosa 2014) and, consequently, their quality of life (Jacob 2012). See Porcarelli and Ricardo (2019).

participated in other UAS activities and courses. The initiative aimed to shed light on certain aspects of this group's visual culture and how this understanding could bring more visibility to a series of disputes occurring in Lisbon's public spaces. At the end of the course, we organised an exhibition of the students' collective project. Between June and July 2025, the work was exhibited on two occasions as part of the parish's cultural programme.

The workshop comprised ten meetings. The first part of the course consisted of a theoretical class exploring the relationship between photography and the city. Various aspects of the history of photography were examined to demonstrate this medium's close relationship with the urban environment, either as a production space or a source of conceptual inspiration. The course demonstrated that the emergence and popularisation of photography occurred alongside unprecedented urbanisation in European and American cities. Both phenomena are part of the dynamics of modernism, sharing themes, aesthetic experiences, and a new way of existence (Crary 2017).

The course began by exploring the interest of Surrealist artists in modern European cities during the first half of the 20th century. Participants were provided with references and examples of photographic works in which the photographer's personal engagement with urban space was the main focus. We therefore discussed various ways of inhabiting and documenting the city, exploring themes that depict the city as a backdrop for visual narratives. These included material heritage and ruins, night photography, urban fictions, non-places and the liminal spaces of suburbs, as well as city walls that serve as palimpsests of inscriptions and interventions.

During the second part of the class, participants were invited to share photographs they had taken in urban settings, with no specific theme imposed. This process was repeated every week. While not everyone brought new images to each meeting, this was not a problem since there were always new images to review and discuss. This part of the course functioned as a collective critique session. Everyone was encouraged to provide suggestions, comments, and critical feedback on their colleagues' photographs. The purpose of these sessions was to demonstrate the difference between what a photograph shows and what the photographer intends to convey. Consequently, the recurring question was: 'what did you want to convey - not just show - with this image?'

As the course progressed, the content of the first part of each class sparked critical discussion in the second part. For example, providing participants with a diverse range of visual references helped them to overcome their fear or embarrassment of photographing something that was considered banal, ugly, decrepit or uninteresting. This process was responsible for deconstructing some of the group's culturally rooted aesthetic assumptions, even if partially. For instance, it challenged the notion that photographic quality is dependent on the aesthetic value of the subject. In other words, it challenged the belief that photographs of sunsets or flowering gardens provide beautiful — and therefore inherently good — images of high aesthetic quality.

The turning point was important for achieving the course's overall goal of creatively stimulating participants through photographic production. Since participants initially tried to reproduce stereotypical images they had seen in the media, such as monumental landscapes, historical monuments, important buildings and exuberant nature, we sought to detach the creative process from this type of image. Additionally, all seven participants were producing photographs with their mobile phones, making it difficult (if not impossible) to produce the kind of high-quality images made by professional photographers using high-performance equipment. To avoid frustrating the participants by pointing out that they could not produce such images with their phones, the course tried to dissuade them from seeking this type of image from the outset.

In addition to the two activities that took place during the classes, the third component of the workshop was a collective project involving all participants. Unlike the photographs that participants could share freely during the classes, this project had a specific theme. Based on the idea of reimagining the city in which one would like to live, the project explored the theme of urban and social transformations currently taking place in Lisbon. These transformations are mainly caused by two factors: the real estate crisis resulting in a surge in property and rental prices, and an overabundance of tourist activities in the city. The consequences of this combination include a general increase in the cost of living, the gentrification of certain areas, the displacement of long-standing residents who cannot afford housing costs in central areas, a general deterioration in quality of life, and, finally, the destruction of social cohesion at a local level.

The third component of the case study involved developing a pedagogical methodology for generating knowledge about urban spaces from the perspective of a particular social group. The methodology was structured around a collective activity of photographic and textual production. Drawing on visual literacy and the relationship between words and images, the activity sought to understand not only how the urban landscape is changing, but also to envisage ways to make the city more accessible and enjoyable for its older residents. The following section provides a brief overview of visual literacy and its key concepts. Next, we present the experiment developed collectively with the UAS group, in which these concepts were tested through practical work involving the relationship between words and images.

5. Visual literacy and photographic production

Visual literacy is defined as the set of skills that facilitate the production of knowledge through engagement with images. These skills involve different types of images and are based on three main actions: producing, transmitting and interpreting images. Analogous to the textual universe, visual literacy enables individuals to ‘write’ and ‘read’ images, thereby enhancing social communication. However, unlike texts, images are not governed by an arbitrarily defined system of codes, meaning that their significance is localised and contingent. Furthermore, visual literacy enables one to access and share perceptions, experiences, and subjective states, facilitating the production of knowledge at an abstract level. Visual literacy is not exclusive to a particular medium and can involve physical, virtual, or even immaterial images, such as mental images, dreams, and aspirations.

The term visual literacy was first used in 1969 by John Debes, founder of the International Visual Literacy Association. He defined it as “a group of vision competencies that a human being can develop by seeing, and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences”. Debes argued that “the development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. (...) [and] through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others” (Debes 1969, 27). Therefore, as it involves the ability to produce and articulate images for others in an intentional way (Ausburn and Ausburn 1978), visual literacy is also an important communication tool.

In addition to enabling the production of knowledge through visual strategies, some authors consider visual literacy to be a form of cultural action. This is because “it encompasses the potential of visual production to promote social engagement and the fulfilment of the individual as a cultural subject” (Brant 2025). In this sense, visual literacy involves the transformative operations that humans undertake with images in order to make sense of the world around them. According to Mirzoeff (2016), such operations are crucial and demand an active disposition. It implies the decoding of visual information into meaningful concepts, since human beings rely on images to establish a relationship with their surrounding reality.

As a cultural practice, the notion of visual literacy encompasses not only the perception and absorption of images – whether mental, digital, analogue, physical or virtual – but also their production and the relationships they establish with the cultural system (Gil 2011, 22). With the aim of making sense of the subjective experience of the urban space at a local level, the activity proposed to the senior population of Alcântara fulfils this cultural function of visual literacy. For example, by actively photographing one’s neighbourhood participant can address cultural aspects such as the interplay between identity and identification, the sense of belonging to a place, and the (in)tangible heritage of specific sites, strengthening the link between U3As and cultural citizenship.

Thus, visual literacy, as a means of producing knowledge through photographic practices, implies that meanings can be created both subjectively and collectively. Therefore, the collective exercise also had a communicative function, as it enabled subjective experiences to be translated into a form of knowledge accessible to others. In order to understand the cultural and communicative aspects of photographic activities, one must consider the medium’s discursive potential. This implies considering that photography and its outcome - the photographic image - have always existed within a network of discourses that impact their value, meaning and application (Neier and Pedri 2019), in different circumstances and levels of reality perception.

6. *Cadavre exquis*: a visual literacy activity involving words, images and a surrealist game

In addition to being grounded in the principles of visual literacy, the methodology for the collective photographic activity draws inspiration from the ideas of the

Surrealist movement in the visual arts and literature. Adopting a gaze that seeks the banal and the everyday, as well as the strange and the disconcerting (Centre Pompidou 2009), the Surrealists recognised photography as a tool capable of blurring the boundaries between documentation and art. To this end, the urban environment of Europe's major cities was adopted as the ideal space for the Surrealist *dérive* (drift), thus cementing the figure of the *flâneur* (wanderer). However, the direct inspiration for the activity came from a specific artistic protocol formalised by a group of French surrealists in 1925: the *cadavre exquis* game. We adapted this idea into a textual-photographic chain involving the workshop participants.

In the original version, each participant took alternate turns to write a part of a sentence in the subject-verb-complement order without knowing what the previous participant had written. This activity was later adapted for graphic art in the form of collective drawings, where the first participant would draw using only a portion of the paper. This part of the sheet was folded to hide the image, leaving only a small section visible. The second participant then had to continue the drawing on the same sheet, and so on with the subsequent contributors. In both its textual and visual forms, the result of these surrealist experiences challenges the normal perception of reality. Created objects resort to the faculty of imagination to consolidate a perception that transcends reality² and can nevertheless be as palpable as reality itself.

Subsequently, variations of the *cadavre exquis* were adopted in literature, photography – through photographic chains, whereby participants respond to the photograph they receive with another photograph – comics, and even cinema. For this research project, the adaptation involved creating a new version of the game that combines photography and text. The process was also inspired by the sequential logic of a chain. One of the workshop participants produced an initial image based on a short text on the theme of urban space. Only this participant was sent the text, and it could not be shared with the others. The second participant then received the first participant's image without any identifying information (such as authorship, title or caption) and responded with a short text seeking to *give meaning* to the

² The etymology of the original French term *surréel* clearly illustrates this: 'sur-' means 'above' or 'beyond', and *réel* means 'real'.

image received³. Then, the third participant receives only this text and must respond with an image of its own, and so on until the final participant.

At the end of the first round, the first participant (who produced the initial image based on the text) receives an image and responds to it with a text. This reverses the production process for the second round. Consequently, all participants will produce a photographic image and write a text. The order of participants is decided randomly by drawing lots. The entire process is anonymous: when receiving a photo or text, a participant does not know who the author is, nor who will receive their contribution. A mediator is therefore needed to receive all the texts and images by email or WhatsApp and send them to the next participant in the order defined by the draw. As might be expected, this activity took place outside the classroom, with participants having a set period of 72 hours to respond to the text or image. Submissions were mainly made via WhatsApp and, in some cases, by email. The author of this article assumed the role of mediator.

The initial text was carefully formulated around the notion that a city's perception is shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural relations that overlap in public spaces. In order to stimulate a multi-sensory perception and a multi-dimensional view of the local neighbourhood where the seniors live, the text also emphasises the role of imagination in transforming society:

The 'image' of a city extends well beyond its photographic representation. It also involves the way in which a common space is shaped by local life and the actions of individuals over time. As 'there is no image without imagination', in order to visualise a tangible and desirable reality, we must imagine the city in which we want to live. This entails articulating the histories, contradictions, affinities and affections that exist at the local level in relation to our own way of observing the world. (Brant et al. 2025)

Participants were required to make a great deal of imaginative effort to provide a visual response to a text or a textual response to an image. The intention was to deepen the connection between words and images, moving beyond simple analogies. Exploring these epistemological possibilities is one of the main areas of research in the study of visual culture. It is argued that the conceptual relationship between words and images is not based solely on the representational function of

³ Before the start of the exercise, some parameters for the text were defined. The minimum significant unit was established as a sentence. Although no maximum limit was defined, it was suggested that an average length of around 50 to 100 words would be appropriate for the exercise. The students were provided with a document containing this information and other technical instructions before the start of the activity.

mimesis. W.J.T. Mitchell, one of the leading theorists in this field, who was particularly interested in this interrelationship, created the concept of *imagetext* (Mitchell 1995). The concept stands for the multimedia nature of each system of representation. Thus, vision is informed by the other senses, and visual experience is a composite construction. The same applies to text, which can evoke sensations that are difficult to translate using textual language.

In our experiment, the concept of *imagetext* emerged when the two media ‘contaminated’ each other, thereby expanding their meanings individually and jointly. In the *cadavre exquis* game proposed to UAS participants, the texts interspersed between the images have the potential to expand their significance. Conversely, the semantic field of the texts is expanded by the influence of the preceding or subsequent images. This meaningful space negotiated between text and image is, in the words of Mitchell (2017, 111), a “third space where ideas, passions, narratives and representations emerge”. It was through this conceptualisation that we sought to evaluate the potential for knowledge production arising from the game’s outcomes.

Thus, based on the image, the participant must create a text, or, as the instructions provided suggested, ‘penetrate the image through writing’. The intention is not to describe the image, but rather to expand its meaning from the visual field to the textual field. Regarding the text production, it could be a spontaneous reaction to the photograph, a fictitious contextualisation of it or an extrapolation of the image. The text may emerge from a mental image or a personal memory evoked by the photograph. This process involves opening up multiple representational possibilities, absorbing new ideas, and inviting a poetic reading of the images. Conversely, when producing an image from a text, participants were not expected to ‘illustrate’ the text, but rather to take an imagetic approach to the text through photography. Starting from the syntax of the text, the image seeks to expand upon it, exploring new meanings and suggesting a sensitive connection between two different media.

7. Results of pedagogical activities and collective project

The evaluation of the results of the photographic workshop held at the Alcântara Senior University can be analysed in two stages. First, we will examine the classroom activities. These include lectures on the history of photographic practices

related to the urban environment, as well as sessions for viewing and critically analysing the photographs presented by the students. Secondly, we will evaluate the proposed methodology for the *cadavre exquis* game — or the ‘photographic chain’, as we referred to the activity during the course — and the final outcome of this project, which brought together the texts and images produced in the form of a publication and a photographic mural.

Pedagogical in-class activities

Although the lectures on the relationship between photography and the city were well received, there was little student participation when the opportunity for comments and debates was offered. By visualising the work of artist-photographers, we aimed to explore how artists engage with issues related to urban space. The different ways of perceiving, occupying and documenting cities were the main focus of these classes. From the outset, it was clear that the style of works and photographic projects presented did not align with the students’ expectations. These images also did not seem to serve as a reference for the type of photography they wanted to produce during the course.

It was observed that participants’ visual references are mainly guided by mass-communication images (from magazines, newspapers, television and advertising), as well as photographs circulating on social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. As expected, the participants did not have any prior familiarity with the presented images or their authors. Visuals of photojournalism or stereotypical images of well-known cities (e.g. Paris with its iconic monuments or the skyscrapers of New York) were deliberately avoided. Additionally, a critical perspective on the style known as ‘street photography’ was considered. The provided references were instead closer to conceptual photography and contemporary art. Despite their initial lack of motivation to view images they did not find particularly interesting, this approach proved important. This is because it demystified the idea that interesting photographs of urban contexts have to show things that are already categorised as ‘beautiful’, ‘grandiose’, ‘dramatic’, ‘nostalgic’ or ‘picturesque’.

In this way, these classes fulfilled two important functions. Firstly, they expanded the students’ visual vocabulary. Secondly, they freed students, at least partially, from the influence of clichéd images and the frustration of being unable

to reproduce them⁴. These two factors directly impacted the second half of the class, which was dedicated to visualising and discussing the photographs spontaneously produced by the participants in the urban space. As previously mentioned, students were asked to photograph aspects related to Lisbon's visuality and to bring a selection of images to each class. The images were projected, and each student had the opportunity to explain their intended message. Preliminary remarks were made, after which the debate was opened up to everyone. This collective discussion was much more participatory than the first part of the class, where they were shown images of visual artists they did not know, often representing contexts far removed from their own.

During the initial critical sessions, the students' images mainly depicted picturesque aspects of the city (e.g. monuments, historical sites, churches, street scenes with flying pigeons, old buildings, landscapes with sunsets and gardens in bloom). Some participants photographed elements that are emblematic of Lisbon, such as the electric tram or the traditional pavement. Gradually, photographs with more personal themes and intentions began to appear among the images they brought to class. They were encouraged to explore these less predictable images in more depth. They were also asked to reflect, primarily, on what they wanted to convey through their photographs rather than what they wanted to show. This distinction was an important part of the pedagogical process, as it forced the participants to move from a passive to an assertive position vis-à-vis their intentions.

As a natural consequence, the participants began to experiment with new approaches and ways of photographing. For example, some started researching the subject before going out to make photographs. Some began to choose the ideal time of day to photograph an object in a public space. In other cases, they returned to a site to re-photograph an element, intending to enhance the image's expressive and communicative potential. This change in focus resulted in a transposition of the initial functionality attributed to photography and, consequently, a shift in the signifying system of the images.

⁴ The clichéd photographs they refer to are usually cityscapes captured by professional photographers. In addition to their experience and trained eye, these photographers have incomparably superior equipment (e.g. cameras with a high dynamic range, a wide colour palette and high image definition, or specific lenses for required images and accessories such as tripods or artificial lights) for producing high-quality images.

Previously, photography was used to attest to places and represent culturally significant objects, thereby certifying them as worthy of attention. Later, participants started using photography for more sophisticated purposes. For example, they photographed to visualise the relationships between different elements of urban space, to gain a better understanding of unusual urban configurations, or even as a tool to report problems impacting their lives. The signifying framework of images has also become more nuanced and complex, evolving from a system based mainly on referentiality – that is, the direct relationship between the photographic image and the objects it depicts – to a symbolic framework. In this regime, objects convey more than their literal meaning because photographs propel discourses and ideas that extend far beyond the formal reality portrayed.

Of the new possibilities that have emerged, the critical approach to conflicts over urban spaces is particularly relevant. By engaging in photographic activities, some participants have become more aware of the impact of gentrification on certain areas of the city, and of how this phenomenon weakens the social networks of older residents. Another criticised aspect is the loss of identity of the urban landscape due to new real estate developments in the riverside area of Lisbon. Photographs taken in the highest part of Alcântara show how recently built buildings have obstructed the view of the Tagus River. These new developments have a significant visual impact on the city. This is not only because they stand out in the cityscape, but also because of the security devices they implement, such as cameras, railings and access controls. For instance, one student photographed these devices, intending to convey the suffocating effect of excessive security.

These images intend to highlight the increasing conflicts over public space in Lisbon. The city, which has become one of the most sought-after international tourist destinations in the space of a few years, has seen a growing deterioration in quality of life at a local level. One student photographed a set of scooters and electric bicycles used mainly by tourists that had been carelessly left on the pavement in front of a public garden. According to her, this situation is becoming increasingly common in the neighbourhood, hindering pedestrians and people with disabilities to the benefit of non-residents.

Another important use of photography that was observed is the reactivation of memories. As they walked through the neighbourhood in which they had lived

for decades, some participants photographed urban spaces that had previously served a different purpose, or that had survived real estate speculation and gentrification. Thus, an image of a building that was once a chocolate factory or a portrait of the owners of the oldest store in the neighbourhood, standing behind an old wooden counter, reveals affective connections with the neighbourhood. Using photography to produce these images made participants aware of their sense of belonging and their local identity.

Collective project

The *cadavre exquis* was an out-of-class activity of a collective and collaborative nature. The activity was intended to explore how photographs and textual information can complement each other in a playful way. The chain format, in which each participant responds to the previous participant's image or text, served as the guiding thread of the experience. The choice of this format had two main consequences. Firstly, a poetic connection between text and image was established. An analogy can be drawn between this type of chain and the poetic device known as 'enjambement'. In poetic texts, this process involves a break in the syntactic structure of the final part of a verse, which continues in the next line. In other words, the meaning of the proposition continues in the next verse, but each part maintains its own meaning independently. Similarly, in our experiment, the text that follows the image complements its meaning. However, the 'reading' of this image is also influenced by the preceding text. In turn, the image impacts the semantic field in which the subsequent text will appear and has a retroactive effect on the preceding text.

Another consequence of the format devised for the activity is that the results are unpredictable. As different authors intersperse different media within each association, it is impossible to predict how these associations will shape the direction of the chain and, consequently, the general meaning of the final object. However, when used as a visual literary method, it is possible to establish parameters that meet the pedagogical objective. Thus, the initial text is of fundamental importance, as it directs the production from a previously defined idea. To this extent, the initial text has emphasised the importance of imagination in facilitating emotional experiences and engagement with a city's reality.

These initial parameters were designed to guide the production of knowledge without controlling it. The process was conducted to provide the greatest possible freedom, enabling the students to ‘go beyond’ what they were asked to do, trusting in their own subjectivity and sensitivity. Nevertheless, the content of the face-to-face classes and critical sessions inevitably influenced the images and texts produced on the themes of urban space, the local community, and the perception of the city. The imaginative faculty evoked in the opening text was fundamental to the success of the experiment as a strategy to promote visual literacy. According to Anne Bamford, visual literacy can produce critical knowledge when “imagination is interwoven through the idea of being ‘critical’ and reasoned responses are combined with affective and imaginative ones” (Bamford 2003, 5). Therefore, imagination functioned as both a creative tool and a critical, speculative possibility, thereby expanding the cognitive scope of the activity.

In cognitive terms, the experiment provided a valuable exercise in the ‘metaphorisation’ of the surrounding reality. By reflecting on the relationship between the textual and visual fields, participants became aware of the hybrid nature of each medium. In metaphor, the relationship between a visual idea and an utterance is based not only on the representational function of both, but also on the multisensory aspects evoked by images and words. When these aspects are brought together, they create a third semantic field. Our version of the *cadavre exquis* was thus a challenging exercise, requiring participants to demonstrate an advanced capacity for abstract reasoning in order to associate concepts and expand upon them.

The possibility of creating knowledge through non-hierarchical relationships between words and images has challenged the study of logic, linguistics and Western philosophy. According to Wittgenstein (2000), thinking is not a hidden, private process, but rather the activity of establishing relationships between verbal and pictorial signs. By considering the mental images evoked by a text to be on the same level as physical images, a space is created in which logical propositions can communicate more than themselves when read literally. In our experiment, as we move between images and texts, we experience a hybrid space that transcends the geography of the parish and is not fixed in a single temporality.

Within this ‘third semantic field’, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the neighbourhood’s cultural identity and access part of the community’s

historical memory. The chain can then be experienced in a multi-sensory way, as evidenced by some of the participants' written contributions. While “restless forms reflect dilemmas, guide changes and conquer spaces”, stone benches “round as thoughts” offer an alternative to the fast pace of city life. Green spaces, such as trees, parks and gardens, appear in both images and texts as places of refuge and resistance, offering moments of pause and contemplation. Memories of a “street named after a poet” or a garden where “several springs dwell” are manifested in the poetics of a city “sometimes happy, sometimes sad”. The image of a street musician playing his guitar evokes the idea of the city as a musical instrument. “You have to learn to play, practise a lot to make it pleasant and habitable”, reads the text that follows it.

The final result of the project was first exhibited as a mural comprising images, which was displayed for three days at a UAS stand during an annual street festival in Alcantara. After that, the mural was transferred to a room in Alcântara's municipal library, where it was displayed for another week. Printed booklets containing the complete sequence of the chain were produced for the opening of the mural exhibition in the library. The 28-page publication was produced simply using a home printer and standard office paper, and was stapled manually. A professional graphic designer was responsible for the layout of the booklet and also accompanied the printing process. The result resembles a zine, containing a cover, a presentation text, and the authors' credits at the end⁵.

The booklet format was the most effective way to convey the *cadavre exquis* experience, as the original sequence of images and texts followed the pagination order of the document. Furthermore, this format makes it easier to relate texts and images. This is an advantage that the graphic publication has over a mural displayed in a public space or even a projection of the images respecting the order of the book. It allows each reader to decide how much time to spend on each part, and to return to previous pages if they wish, facilitating an individual reading experience. These booklets were distributed to participants, with some copies made available to visitors of the library.

⁵ Neither the images nor the texts are identified by the names of their respective authors. A list of all participants is provided at the end of the publication.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we evaluate a visual literacy methodology developed in the context of an educational project carried out in partnership with Alcântara Senior University. Such methodology, based on photographic production and on the articulation between texts and images, has the potential to be employed in other contexts and with other social groups. Before describing it, we briefly addressed the relationship between U3A initiatives and the social inclusion of the senior population. This deviation is justified, as it was important to ascertain whether the developed pedagogical proposal met one of the U3A movement's main objectives, i.e., to promote involvement and active participation of older adults in society.

In relation to this objective, the workshop achieved satisfactory results, as it encouraged participants to adopt a more attentive and systematic approach to observing urban dynamics at a local level. More importantly, each participant's perception of space was made evident through their subjective texts and images. Initially, during face-to-face classes, the production of images was shared with the other students and the teacher. From a pedagogical perspective, this was a key moment, as it fulfilled the important function of paying attention to what the participants had to show and say. However, it was through their collaborative project that their active participation in society became more tangible. This was achieved by displaying a collective outcome comprising images and texts on a neighbourhood street mural and by publishing a zine containing the produced images and texts.

The second goal – to promote self-actualisation of participants at an individual level – was partially achieved, although measuring the impact of the activity on each individual's well-being is very difficult⁶. At the end of the workshop, the students completed an evaluation questionnaire in which they gave positive feedback about the course, emphasising the connection between the practical activities and creative processes. They also described the course as an experience that “challenges creativity and imagination”. Therefore, one significant strength of the methodology is its ability to effectively combine critical thinking and problem-solving through working with photographic images and subjective texts.

In the U3A, self-actualisation is therefore related to the cognitive processes sparked by the pedagogical activities. Such conclusion aligns with several studies

in educational gerontology (Bagheri-Nesami, Rafii, and Oskouie 2010; Cusack 2000; Duay and Bryan 2006; Formosa 2002) that demonstrate how continuous learning can facilitate personal transformation. However, in the specific case of the visual literacy methodology developed for this study, self-actualisation also occurs through developing what can be called an *awareness of the self as a cultural subject*. Essentially, it implies a clearer perception of how the subjective and sociocultural spheres are inextricably linked. Indeed, it is through this ability that visual literacy operates as both a pedagogical strategy and as a cultural action.

To maximise these capabilities, the practical component of the course involved developing a collective project in which the participants shared their experiences of the city through photographic and textual production. The outcome was a consistent body of work reflecting the group's collective perspective on their local environment. This approach was successful, facilitating the production of knowledge at collective level. Additionally, an overall evaluation of the process conducted with this group indicates a connection between play, ageing and cognitive abilities. Although the *cadavre exquis* was intended as a playful and amusing assignment, it demanded sophisticated cognitive operations, such as concept association and multimodal means for conveying meaning. This proved to be an empowering tool for ageing, as participants had the autonomy and freedom to make decisions and determine the semantic and formal aspects of the chain. Furthermore, it reinforced the connection between ageing and establishing a sense of belonging to a place.

The article's scientific contribution lies in exploring visual literacy strategies with great potential to strengthen local cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. Equally importantly, the pedagogical project strengthens a sense of local identity and encourages critical awareness of contemporary urban issues. This is particularly significant in the face of external pressures such as over tourism and gentrification, which threaten the local identity and social cohesion of neighbourhoods. It should be noted that the study involved only a small group of older adults during the workshop. Further research could examine the underlying social aspects of different communities and expand the fieldwork to include a larger sample of participants. Nevertheless, the investigation provides evidence that combining cultural identity and civic engagement is an effective strategy for countering the homogenisation of the urban experience, granting visibility to the

senior population, and building a more equitable, less economically driven use of public spaces.

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