

Anabella Pollen responses to photo booth interview questions by architect Francisco Moura Veiga for the research project 'Typologies of Intimacy', Visarte Entrée Exhibition 2020, Basel, Switzerland.

The exhibition includes a multi-purpose booth and, inside it, an *Emotional Catalogue of Intimate Typologies*. The catalogue contains sections dedicated to a specific typology: phone booth, confessional booth, voting booth, peep-show booth, toilet booth, changing booth, commercial booth and photo booth. Each section is introduced by a short interview with a communications scientist, sociologist, cinematographer, architect, farmer and photographic historian.

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FMV: What are the specificities of a photo booth?

AP: Since their inception as automated photographic devices and spaces in the 1920s, and especially since coin-operated versions proliferated in the public domain since the 1960s, photo booths have largely conformed to a set pattern in terms of design. As a kiosk-like space, designed for the relatively cheap and speedy production of a strip of usually four portrait photographs, they generally contain a limited range of elements: an adjustable swivel stool, a backdrop, a half-curtain for privacy, fixed lens and lights, brief instructions for push-button operation and a simple means for payment. They may have slight variations in construction and styling, and their photographic production method has shifted in recent decades from a dip-and-dunk chemical process to digital means, but they are readily recognisable and regularly visible as a unit of public photographic production in transport terminals, post offices and street corners the world over.

Standardisation, in fact, is a key characteristic of the form of the booth and also of its products. Automated photographic portraiture was designed for simplicity of operation but also to reduce variation in results. It is for this reason that photo booths are the predominant site where official identity records, for passports and other official purposes, have been made. These regulatory portraits, full-face and unsmiling, must follow a strictly enforced set of guidelines in pursuit of neutrality, objectivity and legal status. At the same time, however, the particularity of the photo booth, as a space and as an experience, affords a challenge to these forms of authority.

With the drawing of the curtain, an intimate space is produced, concealed from public view. All the admonishments of what not to do, scripted into the disciplinary instructions and the regulatory space, are open to subversion. In the mechanical environment, no-one is watching and there is no photographer to offend. Photo booths are redolent of other private cubicles, from changing rooms, cells and Catholic confessionals, but perhaps most of all the lights, backdrop and curtain have theatrical associations. The booth can become a space for the performance of official and unofficial selves, and it is also performative, producing particular effects.

The formal limitations of the photo booth have made it a productive site for a century of artists to explore creative possibilities within tight constraints. Even without conscious efforts, any user of a photo booth knows that the outcomes can be unpredictable despite the best endeavours of the manufacturers to produce reliable results. The flash takes one by surprise; composure comes undone; the technology is wont to fail. Akin to other coin-operated amusements, to use a photo booth is to take a gamble. This game of chance has formed a key part of the creative appeal of the photo booth from the surrealists onwards: the photographic self that is fashioned at the end of the encounter is not always the one expected. The camera's unconscious optics reveal inconvenient truths.

FMV: Is photography in and by a photo booth implicitly amateur?

AP: Early photo booths were overseen by an operator who advised on poses and managed the process. As the mechanical elements developed and the sitter became the operator, the subjects of the photographs gained greater agency over the process. The images that result from photo booths, however, are not strictly self-portraits and nor are they inherently amateur efforts. The sitter has limited agency and controls only certain elements. It is the mediation of the process via the machine technology that conditions the results.

From their earliest days, photo booths were sold as opportunities to 'photograph yourself' and the name of the dominant 'Photo-Me' photo booth brand reinforces this point, yet the final strip of photographs is a combination of professionally-managed norms and the personal experience of the user. What are sometimes called vernacular photographs – a wide categorical term including snapshots and other forms of amateur photographic production – are sometimes championed for offering a refreshing antidote to the polish of professional practice by providing photographic view that is of the people, by the people. Photo booth portraits, while always mechanically shaped and moderated, certainly share some of these demotic elements. Everyone who needs a passport or an identity document, grand or humble, must sit on the swivel seat and assume the same position.

FMV: How does the booth justify its survival in the digital era?

AP: Increasing anxieties about international security surveillance and border control have seen a ramping-up of biometric data as a means of authorisation and control. The portrait photograph has taken on new powers under these conditions. Facial recognition technologies utilise identification portraits as part of a broader repertoire of information analysis but the photograph remains central and its standardisation is ever more regulated. While it is possible to produce a digital photograph for formal purposes outside of a photo booth, the technical specifications are so exacting and so tightly enforced that using an automated booth designed to produce governmentally acceptable images remains a popular option. Booths do not seem set to disappear any time soon.

As identification documents move to digital technology and self-portraits have become immediately and freely accessible via widely-owned personal mobile devices, analogue photo booths have taken on an altered status. Like other superseded forms, from vinyl records to VHS videotapes, they have been culturally remediated. As a technology now at risk, with limited producers and suppliers for their component parts, they have achieved rarity value and have become cherished by enthusiasts and collectors. More likely to be found now in retro clothing stores or as novelty entertainments at parties and weddings, analogue photo booths are both nostalgic technology and fashion statements to be worn as images on T-shirts. Their technical fallibilities and photographic limitations have taken on fresh qualities of quaintness and charm in an endlessly regulated and perfectible world of images.

Two personal stories:

1. Robin and Josie, 1962



After my mother and father died and I inherited the family photograph collection, I was astonished to find a joint photo booth portrait taken during their engagement. It knocked me sideways. I had never seen the photograph before, and I'd never seen them this way before. Squeezed into a booth, in each other's arms, they performed warm togetherness for the automated camera. In front of the familiar photo booth curtain, my father's spectacles reflected the photographic flash. Dressed in formal clothing for an unknown event – I never again saw my father in a bow tie and wing collar, and my mother only wore lipstick and pearls for very special occasions – and photographed in black and white, as was the norm, they nonetheless resembled in so many ways the informal loving performances I produced with lovers in photo booths in various courtships from the 1980s onwards. Photographs of one's parents before they become parents are a curious thing; they show self-contained people free from the roles by which their children always define them. In the case of divorced parents and deceased parents, this photographic uncanny is elevated, especially when they show an intimate moment, in a private space, as a very small fragment from a forgotten time.

2. Tbilisi, Georgia, 2019



Spectacular statement buildings in flamboyant designs flourished in Tbilisi, Georgia under the Saakashvili presidency, 2004-2013. These nestle between ancient Zoroastrian temples, crumbling ornate 18th century domestic architecture, grand 19th century opera houses and 20th century Soviet ruins. As old buildings are levelled for luxury hotels for Tbilisi's new tourism, the city combines dereliction with development. The sight of a lone photo booth was therefore hard to read as a British visitor to the city in 2019. With well-worn graffiti-marked metal, neon signage and the familiar pleated curtain of photo booths worldwide, it could have been standing on the same scrubland since, perhaps, the 1960s. The fresh instructions, signalling a cost of 4 lari (equivalent to 1 British pound) meant it had to be from at least the mid-1990s when the Russian rouble was replaced. Further investigation showed the photo booth's provenance to be far more recent: a Facebook page put it amidst Tbilisi's young art scene, whose galleries and maker spaces have made the city the newest site for international fashion weeks and architecture biennials. Tbilisi's retro photo booth, between stray dogs and construction cranes, encapsulates the city's transitional new-old status.