

SELFIE RECREATION

EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR CREATIVE REFLECTION AND THE SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

RECREAR EL SELFIE. ESTRATEGIAS EDUCATIVAS PARA LA REFLEXIÓN CREATIVA Y LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN SIMBÓLICA DE LA IDENTIDAD

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Abstract

This article focuses on contemporary photography teaching through conceptual reflection and photographic creation. The dominant theme of this research is social media, which is filled with self-representing and intimacy lead images. This is an art education research based in the artistic actions of a group of students who - through words and images - reflect on the purposes of social media and its influence in contemporary artistic practices such as privacy exposure, photographic narration and the projection of identity through photography.

Key words

Contemporary photography; narrative photography; artistic education; social media; post-adolescence.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la enseñanza de la fotografía contemporánea a través de la reflexión conceptual y de la creación fotográfica en un contexto capitaneado por las redes sociales rebosantes de imágenes, en el que la intimidad y la auto-representación tienen un papel fundamental. Se trata de una investigación educativa basada en las artes desarrollada a través de tres acciones artísticas en las que el alumnado reflexiona –con palabras y con imágenes– sobre los usos de las redes sociales y su influencia en las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas, la exhibición de la intimidad, el relato fotográfico y la proyección de la identidad a través de la fotografía.

Palabras clave

Fotografía contemporánea; narrativa fotográfica; educación artística; redes sociales; post-adolescencia.

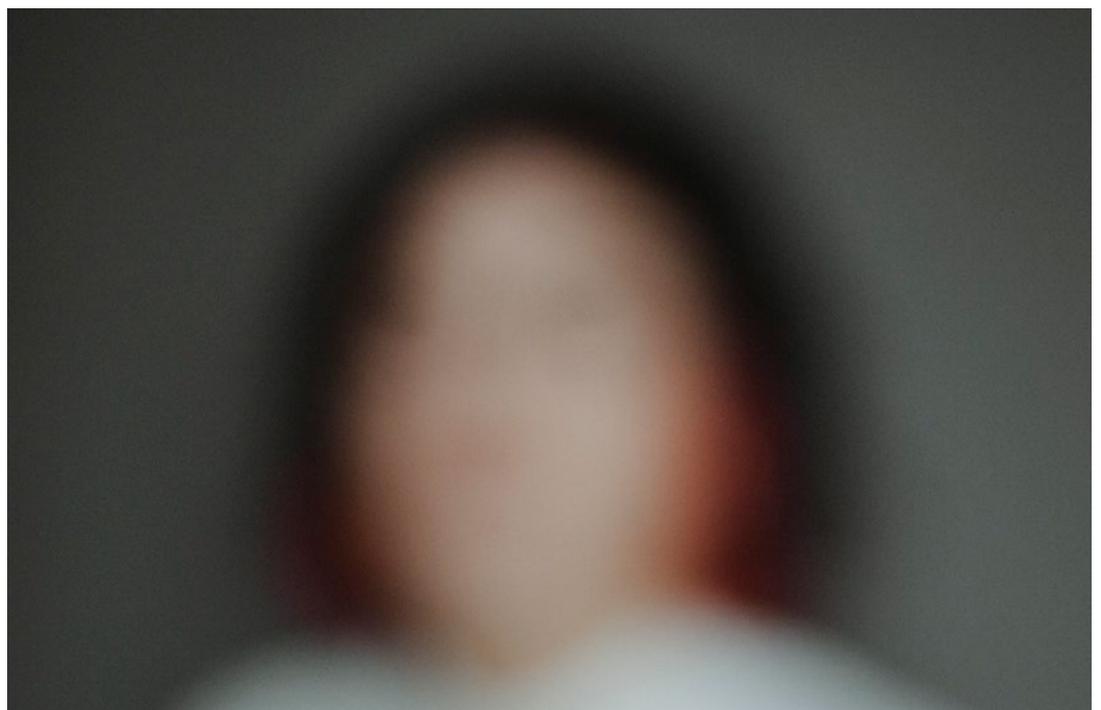


Image 1. Sabela Eiriz, 2021.

1. APPROACHING PHOTOGRAPHY THROUGH CONTEMPORANEITY

This investigation was developed with the Photography students of Pablo Picasso's School of Art (Escuela de Arte Pablo Picasso, A Coruña) for a month and a half during my teaching internship as a Masters of Art Teaching student. In this context I had the opportunity to choose the subject in which I wanted to develop my proposal, so I decided to go for Theory of Photography, which was fundamentally theoretical. My intention was to approach the conceptual and visual trends of contemporary photography through an methodology of inquiry that combined theory and practise; all evoking conceptual reflection and photographic creation in the students.

In a context reigned by social media overflowed with images, in which privacy and self-representation play a main role, two important conceptual points appear and they will be approached by visual research: the exposure of privacy and the projection of identity through photography. Social media is one of the main channels of expression and communication of today's youngest generations. This channel has marked a before and after in the creation of new habits as well as symbolic reconstruction. Images nowadays can be observed and generated on a continuous mass scale, both in a communicative and a self-expressive way. Therefore, we are looking to incentivise a critical and reflective attitude in the students, focusing on the numerous artistic practises that cater to the important role of photography and social media when it comes to constructing and deconstructing the identity and configuring our speech.

This educational research based on photography is articulated through an artographic methodology of qualitative inquiry, in which my artist, teacher and researcher selves are joined in an equilateral manner to try to approach all circumstances related to education and analysis. The teaching-learning practice develops through experiencing actions as well as artistic and educational processes that interact by understanding the classroom as an experimental lab (Mesías-Lema, 2017). Using an artist's creative process as a reference, the teaching methodology is transformed into experience and the dynamics relate and apply to those on the students' projects (Mesías-Lema, 2019, p.15). We think not only through concepts and theory but also through images, using tools in which images have the same research value as text (Marín Viadel y Roldán, 2014).

This research is developed through three main artistic actions in which students (through words and images) reflect on the use of social media; the influence of the latter in contemporary artistic practices, the use of intimate photography and the construction of identity through photographic narrative. The two first actions take place in the classroom and approach Instagram's photographic activity: during the first one (Tell me who you're following and...) we will reflect on both intimate and extimist practises in the online world. On the second, we will focus on how to execute self-representation. The third and last action will leave Instagram and head towards our own selves and reflect on the personal creation of identity, putting the visual speech tools to use to construct a self-portrait.

¹ The origin of the word "extimist" comes from the term "extimacy" which appears on *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis* by Lacan referring paradoxically to the most intimate aspects of the exterior (somehow as a rupture of intimacy). It evolves into its current meaning with Tisseron and his *L'intimité suresposée*, in which he redefines the term as an exhibition of the most intimate but revealed aspects of a person, the ones we chose to tell; not so much to just share them but to use others as a reflection to reaffirm ourselves (Baigorri-Ballarín, 2019, pp. 607-608).

2. TELL ME WHO YOU FOLLOW AND... AN INTERVENTION WITH THE STUDENTS ABOUT THE VISUAL, SOCIAL, DIGITAL NARRATIVE

Since the democratisation of photography, we have made the most of this techniques capability to capture elements that border our context and configure our identity to construct a cronic visuality of our lives that works as an observational testimony (Sontag, 2009). In the last few years, this practice has been fomented by an expansion of social media and the mass use of smartphones, turning the photographic registration of events, travels and social encounters into something conventional, as well as sharing with other users who are usually broad and well known. The photographic gesture becomes a relating act of interpersonal communication that “more than reflecting an event it wants to manifest our presence in such event” (Fontcuberta en Alonso, 2013). In this virtual context, privacy limits can find themselves compromised; social media platforms offer certain tools that avoid content propagation, but not all of us know them or what we share is under our own unique control. In this sense, privacy has to do with what we decide to show as much as the control we have over what we’ve done. The problem arises when the look for self-affirmation turns into a virtual reality routine; an obsession to certify our existence, to mock time and disappearance (Aguilar-Nuevo y Lara-Barranco, 2011, p. 532) and imposing the thought of the need to be virtual in order to be real. All this surrounded by an environment in which self stands above all collectivity, and added to the social pressure of having to be part of trends and most recent phenomenons. We are not only surrounded by images, we also live through them. We generate visual experiences to build and share our life, materially and non-materially.

When it comes to approaching contemporary photography trends with the students, I thoroughly analyse intimate and autobiographical proposals, such as the ones by artists like Félix González-Torres, whose artistic interventions are based on his own personal experiences; also Rinko Kawauchi’s mosaic exhibitions and Alberto Lizaralde photobook titled *everything will be ok* which both capture fragments of their day to day lives to construct a visual and conceptual diary. All together we observe how photography is not only a way to capture our everyday lives, in which we exhibit our autobiography with a higher or a lower degree of fiction or control over the images. Once more, the limits to privacy and public diffuse and they depend on a conceptual and artistic speech.

From this junction between artistic practices and photographic activity which reign in the virtual world, I invite my students to investigate and reflect on photographs that are shared on a particular high photography centred social media platform: Instagram. Trying to suppress all prejudices we focus as a group as well as individually on the most used patterns when it comes to sharing our visual autobiography and the way this social media platform is used and consumed. The proposal I try to share with the students is to develop this reflection with the photographic language itself, making Instagram images their own changing them through the use of text.

In terms of artistic references, I share two projects in which photography and text entwine and enrich the symbolic value of both languages. On one hand, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* by Gillian Wearin (image 2), in

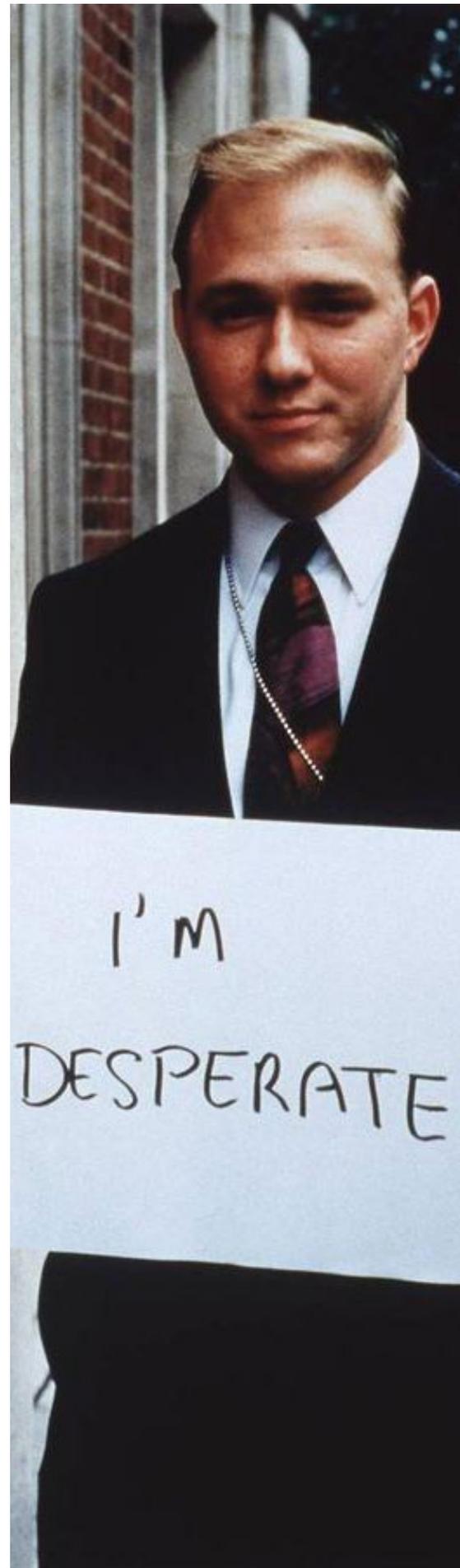


Image 2. Gillian Wearin, 1992-1993.

which the artist reveals the connection between personal lives interior and exterior; between the individual and society, photographing unknown people holding a banner in which they have already written their thoughts or opinions. An honest response that breaks with stereotypes and alters our view toward them. On the other hand I show them Kenneth Lum's artwork, in which each photographic piece is accompanied by a repetitive text that redefines and reconstructs what is happening in the image, generating new meanings.

The actions development takes place in small groups in which during a few minutes, they explore their own Instagram accounts to spot images they can manipulate. During this time, I approach each one of them to detect possible questions or doubts and help them through their creative development. Most of the students have two accounts, a personal and a professional one, so I encourage them to use the first. Once work time is over, we look at all the different images in the classroom. Each group presents their ideas and we comment on the impressions made, analysing the meaning of the message they want to communicate or how the text and images are working, both separately and in conjunction.

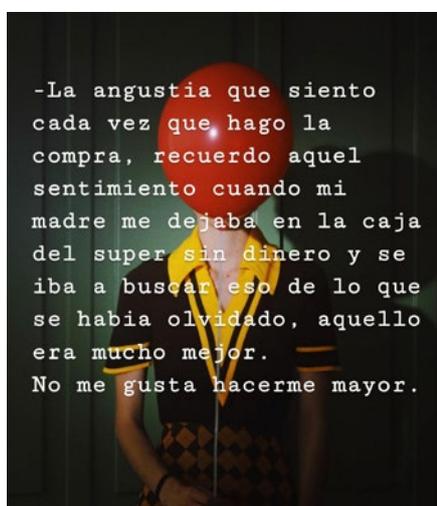


Image 3. Antía Durán and Miriam Díaz, 2020.

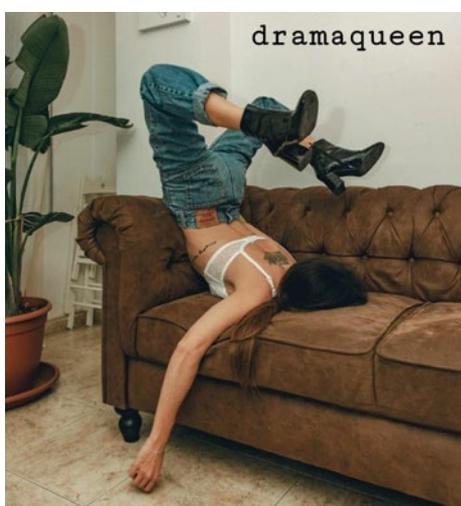


Image 4. Sergio Quintáns and Sara Costas, 2020.



Image 5. Antía Durán and Miriam Díaz, 2020.

Despite all my recommendations, part of the task was focused on advertising images, like fashion or art (image 3), and the reflection on behaviours and usual habits remains then hidden. I take this opportunity to highlight the importance of image selection in these sort of creative processes, and how it can determine the results of our project. Without an intention to underestimate their criteria, I try to make them understand the narrative possibilities of each image. At the same time it is interesting to observe how, even though they do not talk about web dynamics, they do reveal the identities and interests of these students, who are everyday Instagram users. It surprises me to find a childlike discourse in a context of late adolescence, that is felt in the time of deduction of this stage of life. We also observe how, through the addition of text, the image is turned into something else, more or less connected with the original, opening new ways of interpretation.

The proposals of the students reference the most usual trends of photography on Instagram, questioning their manner and visual strategies (image 4). They use satire and demonstration through a message more or less provocative that catches the eye, travelling from the text to the image and vice versa (image 5). Along these same lines, other interventions that focus on this private yet exhibitionist activity of the web (image 6) are combined with texts originated from Instagram itself. Therefore they are questioning through their own language, the dynamics offered by this application and the control that their users can have over it.



Image 6. Alba Pérez, Sara Muñíos and Natalia Pérez, 2020.

This first action with the students entails the first approach to a complex and silent group that observes me and listens to me for the first time. Their answers and proposals create the beginning of learning, thinking and talking about contemporary photography and Instagram as its most direct and familiar environment.

3. HAPPYGRAM. TALKING ABOUT THE IMAGE WITH THE IMAGE

The internet is a favourable space for privacy exhibition, in front of an audience that looks at their screens, in which the 'self' acquires the roles of author, narrator and character. The biographical material shared in the happygram often responds to trends characterised by happiness, wellbeing and perfection. Inside all of that photographic activity we find a star image; the selfie; the most famous media self-portrait of this era. The selfie is not only a type of self-portrait, but also an image subcategory shared on social media whose characteristics go beyond the mere wish of self-representing (Ayerbe and Cuenca, 2019, pp. 3-4). Prejudices that are often related to the internet make it difficult to see the web as an environment where social dynamics can go beyond the ego; the same way as negative opinions that describe the selfie as an egocentric act are not always open to accept the all so empowering that characterises it; that defines and intervenes our immaterial online environment through the image of our bodies and complexion.

With an open and critical mind, I present the students with this double phenomenon of the selfie and its great presence on the web. To expose our intimacy is a way of determining our existence and defining who we are; to certify the here and now in front of a public that observes us through a screen as well as building a narrative that transcends reality. Between all the intimate discourse shared online, we can highlight two main trends: the self-fiction one (which content has a strong commercial character) and the vulnerable one (with an intimate expression). Both share contradictory virtual language paradoxes and the slick characteristics that identify this type of

communication; both start as new individual exercises that develop into a collective, creating a new way of group relation (Canga Sosa, 2015, p. 401). Using contemporary photographic practises as a precedent that question the truth of the image, we begin to wonder: Are these photographs working as a vivid extract of our everyday lives and a reliable representation of our identity?

During this second action with the students, I propose to question the working dynamics of showing and perceiving identity through Instagram, making images their own and re-interpreting them (altering them using either collage, digital makeover or remake) to promote the development of reflection through image construction. When it comes to providing artistic and photographic references, I show them Joan Fontcuberta's artwork *Through the mirror (A través del mirall)* in which the academic and artist work with social media images; the provocative exhibition of Richard Prince's *New Portraits* (in which he made Instagram images his own without asking for the owners' permissions) and *Intimidación Romero* collages, exhibited online and using photographs altered by pixels, creating an unsettling reality that destroys all forms of representation. Three types of work in which their creators question control in very different ways as well as the interest in showing privacy online.

On the other hand, I introduce them to Celeste Barber's work (image 7), which questions the body impositions of society, reflecting on social media practises through the reconstruction of celebrities' 'impossible' photographs with very difficult postures and perfect bodies, showing a more quotidian version of them.



Image 8. Celeste Barber, 2019.

I then organise the class in small groups so they can run through Instagram and select images to develop their action. Meanwhile I observe them closely, visiting each group to know their ideas and detect, once more, any possible questions or doubts. Once they've finished, we visualise the proposals, and each group briefly explains the context and the direction of their image, and we all comment on their performance.

Every proposal has a comical hue that alludes to postures and gestures found on Instagram. The interpretation of these images happens through the comparison and parallelism with other images found on the internet. When it comes to placing them one next to the other, the photographs converse, rebuilding their context. This way, hieratic self-portraits are turned into police custody images (image 6) and impossible postures used in fashion photography have their meaning altered with mockery (image 7). Using

these small gestures, the students detect something of their interest to talk about, generating a simple but effective discourse through disposition and combination of photographic images.



Image 9. Sara Costas and Malena Montejo, 2020.



Image 10. Sara Costas and Malena Montejo, 2020.

They also approach the compulsive act of taking selfies that we can observe on Instagram accounts full of images which are almost identical, due to the users photographing themselves with the same expression over and over again. The students photograph a statue with Instagram filters, altering its face and generating new expressions for a completely immutable complexion. The composition results present a reference to Instagram in parallel with the pictures already taken, constructing a visual and conceptual statement in a precise and ironic manner.

4. ALTER—SELFIE. ARTISTIC AND PHOTOGRAPHIC CREATION WITH THE STUDENTS

Having approached the context and practises of contemporary photography, and relating them to the mediatic context of Instagram as well as drawing the paths in which we border and perceive our identity, I suggest to the students one last task: to construct a photographic discourse through a self portrait. I present it as a personal exercise, inviting them to the conceptual reflection and development of self identity through photographic production. This is why on this occasion the work will be done outside of the classroom over the course of a few days. The only prerequisite is the use of an object as inspiration in order to conceptualise and create their self-portrait. This way I can promote a shared starting point to draw the idea and visual narrative of the image, ensuring a trajectory of the discourse. It is about having a pretext to initiate or guide such a wide process as self-portraying. On the other hand, I ask them to accompany each image with a text that explains the creative process, the concept that they want to express and in which way they decide to portray it, to know and value the efficiency of the image as well as the discourse.

Whitin the great variety of proposals in their works, I observe a very deep emotional and intimate display that I am personally thankful for. At the end of the day, these students hardly know me – nor I them – nevertheless a part of them becomes so transparent that they have decided to have confidence in this creative process to show their ideas and conflicts through the photographic language. I encounter people who are willing to talk, with personal and shared worries, more or less shielded or vulnerable. It is all about the sensitive material that has unfolded within their thoughts, interests and

worries in first-person, awakening links between them, identifying themselves in an individual way but also as a group. Therefore it is not only self-understanding but also group-understanding.

The vast majority of their projects circle around the theme of their physical aspect. Repeatedly we see elements of make-up, mirrors, and other objects and symbols that have to do with or affect their physiques. They are supposed to be a means of self exploration and “going deeply into oneself, getting lost in your thoughts (...) looking for inner peace” (Malena Montejo, image 11).



Image 11. Malena Montejo, 2020.

That reflection is also present on our smartphone screens, which responds with an image in real time as a continuous searching and finding of what is real. They give reflection and image a status of reality, their entity as representation, approaching “two realities: an analogic one, real, with human contact (...) and another that is completely digital, the social media one (...) Nowadays we play a real part with real interaction with real people but on the other hand we are digital, with exclusive social relationships within the digital world” (Daniel Muñoz Torres, image 12).



Image 12. Daniel Muñoz Torres, 2020.

In this performance of identity, ornaments often intervene and compliment our complexion and physical appearance. We find two positions that confront stereotypes and social conventions: on the one hand, understanding make-up as a personal decision and an accessory, that doesn't cover but has a meaning (image 13); on the other hand to fight the need of correcting and hiding, reveling "the inner fight of a person. Trying to see themselves physically fit and not being able to achieve it" (Natalia Pérez, image 14). These images are not trying so much to show privacy but to share it, giving light to what we tend to keep in the dark.



Image 13. Iria Rosende, 2020.



Image 14. Natalia Pérez Martínez, 2020.

There are also photographs with an aspect of performance, in which their narratives move away from the personal story; building an everyday intimate image which turns into an aggressive fiction that, despite everything, talks about the actual self portrayer (image 15). Her interest is not only the things she is looking to say or communicate, but also what we can deduce from unconsciousness, what she reveals about her authorship.

Photographs that intervene on the body itself are also recurrent, using elements that transmit an external social imposition. The self-portrait has a social implication, a preoccupation with problems beyond the autobiographical narrative. The marks that intervene on the face, covering it (images 16 and 17) respond to certain references known in our imagination: patching, oppression and abuse over the body.



Image 15. Sara Costas, 2020.



Image 16. Miguel Rodríguez, 2020.



Image 17. Alba Pérez, 2020.

This oppression takes shape in other types of materials, like plastic on the body, which relates directly with anxiety. *"I remember when I was little, my mum had a fear of me putting a plastic bag over my head in case I suffocated. Maybe because I had the bad habit doing it. I have always liked to isolate from the world"* (Alba Pérez, image 17). Once we are over the first impression of the more evident bag, we can focus on the elements that give meaning to the image, and how this piece of plastic that limits the amount of air is contradicted by the serene look on her face; hidden by a see-through surface that distorts it but still allowing us to see it.

Of all self portraits, one of them acts out in the object all the staging. Although there is no body it is still a self narrative, a representation of the photographer that presents herself through an image. Her proposal recurs to the poetry in objects, identifying herself with the action that is taking place; the contradiction between fire and water, pleasure and destruction, the coexistence of incompatible elements.

Other more intimate and personal images are focused on self narratives where intimacy is the main concern. The body is treated as just another cotidian element in a still life. This is an image of intimacy, with a non-conventional gesture, making more evident the staging and photographic intentions. Despite its performativity, there is still a *voyeuristic* feeling for the observers. The look becomes a channel for honesty, permeating through the image, seeking for a mutual reflection and a point of support from the person behind the camera/spectator. In another case, performativity takes place to construct one's own story (image 18). Narrative and intimacy are joined and the stage (all set up and ready) gives attributes to an 'I', turning it into another person, disguising themselves to be represented. The person is in themselves but also through others: *This is not me, this is the 'I' I do not want to be, who I do not want to become"* (Sara Muñños).

The self-portrait boils down to a reflection and its authorship defined by all the decisions made before, during and after the caption, and building itself through its development, both conceptual and visual.



Image 18. Sara Muñños, 2020.

5. EPILOGUE

This proposal has looked for student involvement to focus on the reality and trends of contemporary photography, through a critical and creative type of reflection. Thanks to this visual and conceptual approach to the media context, the closest one to the contemporary image – and at the same time a common and quotidian environment for the students themselves – we have dug deeply into our life habits and the use of the web through different languages and artistic media; a thematic field in which current artistic productions prevail (Martín Prada, 2015, pp. 24–29). Therefore, it is a meta-photographic proposal, in which the same language that we study is also applied to think about itself, a work methodology often used in contemporary artistic practises. This sort of approach allows us to reflect on our own as well as the work of others, understanding the limits and relations between the images and/or their references, or even relate them to our cultural context. The learning proposal with the students is linked to a research based on photography and constructed through text and image, so much that the visual medium turns out to be fundamental when it comes to research and to be able to understand and comprehend the postmodern world (Abaker Baptista, 2014, pp. 116–117).

In reference to the student projects, it is important to highlight that the interesting part of the image wasn't only its iconic identity, but also what we can get to know through it (Broullón-Lozano, 2015, pp. 223–224). Some of the works presented shift away from the initial proposal, they do however allow us to learn more about the students themselves as creators. On the other hand it is also important to emphasize how the selfie doesn't have to be reduced to a simple 'window display' as all the decisions (conscious or otherwise) that we make when we capture our image and define how we want to be seen, are also a statement. The photographic image acquires a new narrative character. Configuring other actions through a visual discourse promotes a thought beyond words to contribute to the photographic formation of the students.

Finally it should also be noted how other elements have turned out to be key when it comes to working with an uncooperative and reserved group of students. Active listening; observation and close monitoring; open questions that promote their thinking and entice their creativity as well as building an environment of confidence to work from the emotions and vulnerabilities have all helped to achieve results that allow us to get closer with honesty and creative compromise.

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