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Chapter 12

The Artist's Book as a Form of Autoethnography for the Teaching Profession



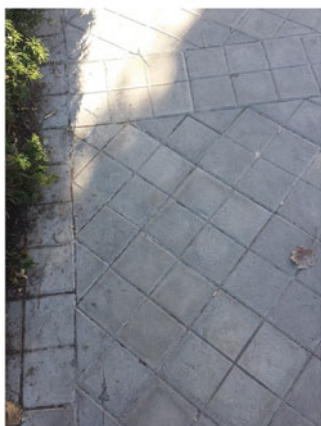
Marián López Fernández-Cao

Reflections on the Photographic Act

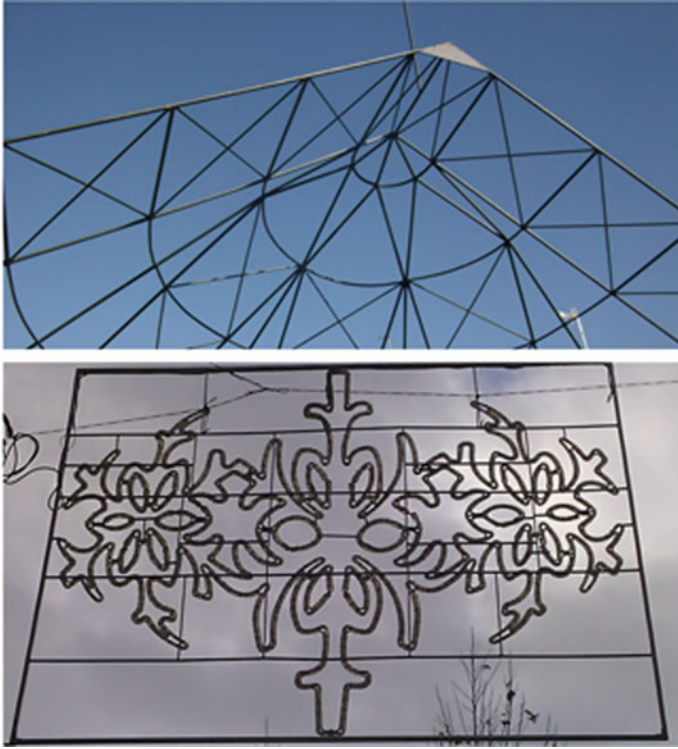
Photography both connects and separates us from reality. As Susan Sontag pointed out in her famous *On Photography*, the camera (nowadays, usually a smartphone) is both a bridge and a divide. It unites but also insulates us. Perhaps that is why we take and save photographs of things that unsettle us, to make them our own. Photography is an act of possession, even if we do not know exactly what for and why we appropriate something external. Authors such as Barthes (1989), Thysseron (2002), Sontag (2014), and Berger (2000), have discussed photography and the photographic act from various points of view that all nevertheless refer to an always unfinished and failed understanding of reality, of a reality that is impossible to pin down.

Humans take photographs to know, possess, understand and acquaint themselves with external—albeit possibly familiar—facts, events and realities. Photography renders the familiar strange and the strange familiar. There are a myriad of gazes, ranging from a desire to dominate to a tenacious observation that seeks to understand what is before us, in front of our eyes, through its imaginary capture: from a wide-angle shot looking down, that restores a feeling of domination over reality, to a close-up that reveals the humility of the person observing, of the person seeking to understand and be understood through the photographic act. Rafaèle Genet, who works at the University of Granada Education Faculty, teaches her students to see through new eyes using photography. In her doctoral thesis, “City and Artistic Education in Initial Teacher Training: Educational Research Based on the Visual Arts” (2016), photography becomes an educational medium that renders the commonplace new and connects our gaze to events, emotions, forms and education.

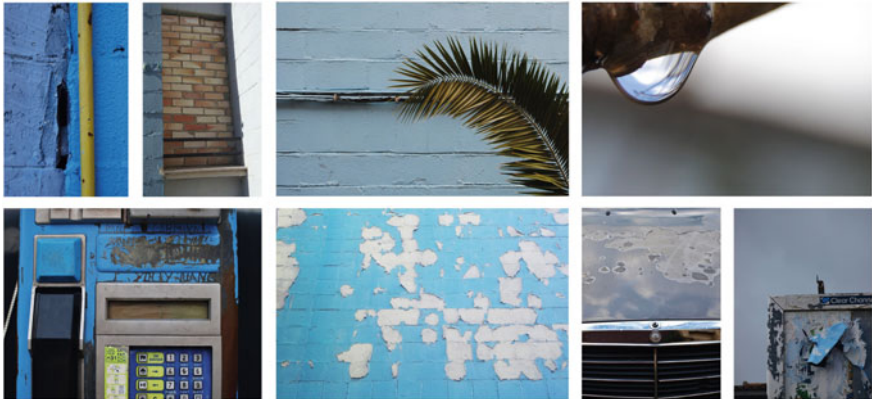
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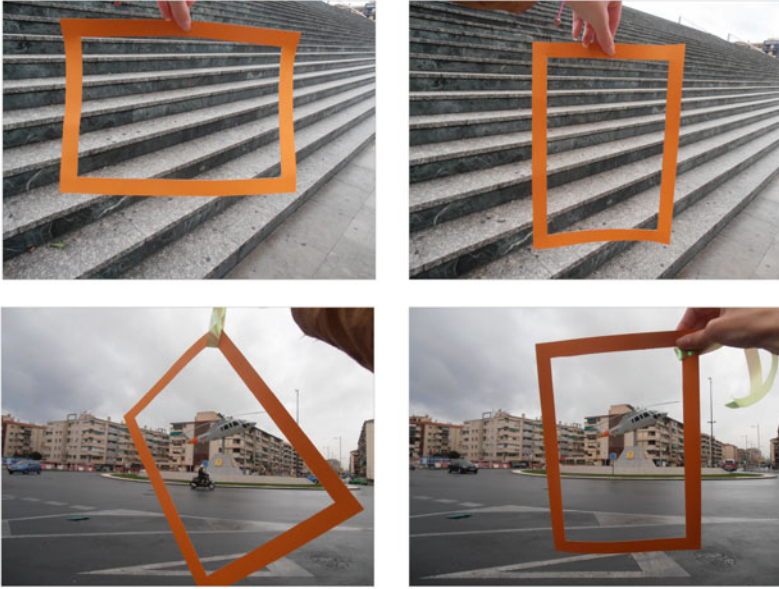
Genet, R. (2015). *Enseñar, matemáticas* [Teaching, mathematics]. Photo essay composed of one digital photograph by González, R., one by Chalmers, S., two by Rodríguez, Y., one by Ramón, L. and one by Campos, A.



Genet, R. (2015). *Enseñar, matemáticas* [Teaching, mathematics]. Photo essay composed of one digital photograph by Baltar, E. and another by Lara, N.



Genet, R. (2013). *Detalles significantes I* [significant details I]. Photo essay composed of one digital photograph by Callegari, E., one by Gutiérrez, M. D., one by González, J., one by Callegari, E., one by Lamela, A. and two by Callegari, E. Using a simple and synthetic approach, she teaches students how to observe



Genet, R. (2015). *Procesos de aprendizaje, la ciudad enmarcada II* [learning processes, the city framed II]. Photo essay composed of four digital photographs by Sánchez, J. M.



Migrant Mother, California, 1936

Photography establishes a relationship between ourselves and others. The great photographer Dorothea Lange described “migrant mother” (Nipomo, California 1936), one of her most famous photographs, as follows:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

Her method of working is best explained in her own words:

My own approach is based upon three considerations: First — hands off! Whenever I photograph I do not molest or tamper with or arrange. Second — a sense of place. I try to picture as part of its surroundings, as having roots. Third — a sense of time. Whatever I photograph, I try to show as having its position in the past or in the present. (in López Fernández Cao, 2015)

Beyond presenting a history of photography that could be related to the profession of teaching, with the ethics of listening, observing, learning and sharing, I believe that to photograph is also to observe, to listen to the world, to stop, to seek connection and to reflect on and arrange what one has seen. Art, and in this case photography, has the capacity to order what is outside and disorder what is inside. This is why art is always an act of restructuring.



Masumi Hayashi

Turning to Masumi Hayashi's work and the juxtaposition of multiple gazes, can the idea of constructionism, of cognitive collage, of fragments of reality, be better expressed in one gaze?



Frances Benjamin Johnston. *Stairway of the Treasurer's Residence: Students at Work*, from the *Hampton Album*, 1899–1900. Moma, NY

Benjamin Johnston's work in general, and this photograph in particular, is extremely attractive. The picture shows six people working on a joint project. They all appear to be utterly absorbed in something that is simultaneously collective and individual, each one working with care and diligence on his part of the project. It reminds me of a Renaissance descent, where dynamism and harmony coexist and complement one another. Could this be the image of a research project? I believe that theorists of art-based research mean something similar to this when they claim that images—non-discursive languages—offer us useful representations for thinking.

Artists' Books

Artists' books are not books of or about art. Rather, they are works of art conceived in book format and often published by the artists themselves. A product of the 1960s,

they are the conceptual result of a spirit that rebelled against the elitism of the art world. The images in such works must have an interconnection. An artist's book is conceived as a project with a sequence, a rhythm and a particular cadence, and is related to the idea of photo-book narration discussed in chapter nine. There are few rules about the artist's book because artists are little given to setting rules and more predisposed to independent self-regulation, but it is a work of art in itself, where each and every one of the pieces is necessary for the book's symbolic function. I shall focus on two examples that have perhaps formed the basis of the work I have been doing for many years now with my students. Both books are published by the same house, Mestizo, with which I must share a similar vision.

Through her family album, Ana Casas Broda seeks a shared identity, for being through, for and towards others. Her backwards-looking quest forms a dialogue with her grandmother's diaries that in some way is a communication backwards, forwards and towards herself. The work in *Álbum* pivots around the family relationship as seen through photographs (Casas, 2000). The house and the body are the structural coordinates while photography is the medium that, in her words, allows us to fix our gaze and let others enter it. Through photographs and texts, the book addresses issues such as memory, personal and cultural heritage and photography as a way of exploring identity. *Álbum* was published as a book in 2000 by Mestizo (Spain) and presented in an exhibition that brought together photographs, texts, videos and objects:

My mother took me to Mexico when I was eight years old. I was born in Spain and lived part of my childhood in Vienna, Austria. I worked on *Álbum* for fourteen years. I was drawn to the project by my deep attraction to the photographs that my grandmother took of my early childhood in Vienna. I could not distinguish my memories from her images and felt that they held a mystery that was essential to me. This led me to make a series from some of the photographs of my childhood, which subsequently grew and spurred me to reflect on photography and its relationship to memory and identity. Gradually, *Álbum* became a more in-depth exploration and addressed issues central to family relationships, the history of my ancestors and the construction of the body within the search for identity.



Vienna, 23 July 1996

The house is in its last days. A company is here to take everything away. They have scrapped most of the furniture, smashing it with axes because they say it is worthless. I take pictures of everything so as to save every last detail.

I want to say goodbye with my eyes open.



Vienna, 2 January 1995

Today when I was in the bath, I felt an uneasiness for the first time. A certain sadness in the walls, an air that I hadn't noticed before, crept into me. Something is falling apart. I haven't been able to sleep ever since I arrived. I read until dawn and during the day I wander drowsily around the house. I'm scared.

Vienna, 12 July 1995

I returned to Vienna a few days ago. Omama will have to leave the house this summer; she is eighty-five years old and can no longer live alone. When we call my mother, she is always very nervous and makes plans. Yesterday, she talked about taking her to Mexico. From Omama's tone of voice, I think that she wants to stay.

Vienna, 13 July 1995

Today we went to a home surrounded by huge trees. We were accompanied by my grandmother's sister. They told me that when they were children they had lived only a few streets away, and that there had been a meadow there where they used to play. Omama remembers where every stick of furniture had been in that house, where to stretch out her hand to switch on the light. That was over eighty years ago. I know that she's already decided.

To journey through Ana Casas's *Álbum* is to enter an identity shaped by lost and recovered spaces, by one's own and others' memories, by the bonds that trap and strengthen us. I believe that the meditated construction of her artist's book using the family album and other images that move her represents an exercise that emerged from the awakening of mechanisms beyond the discursive ones, signalling the importance of artistic, poetic and visual resources.

In *Recuperar la luz* (Canal & Ramiro, 2004), Rosa Sánchez Ramiro introduces her book as follows:

Some time ago I was lucky enough to fall seriously ill. This gave me a wealth of knowledge and life experiences that more than compensated for the danger. That's how I feel. I believe that the way in which I lived the experience of illness was decisive in reaching this clear conviction. I don't know if what happens to us is merely the result of a chain of events or if there is a need that drives everything that happens. What I do know is that from the day when measured time stopped, everything has happened as if it were inevitable.

It all started when, shortly after making my debut as a hospital patient, a peculiar looking man appeared in my room. After introducing himself as my doctor and telling me the chemotherapy treatment I would be given, he let me know in a few words that I was on the other side of the mirror. I haven't made it clear that this man—who was obviously Carlos— was not alone. He was accompanied by a camera, hanging from his neck and resting on his white coat, a Cyclops ready to act as a witness to the challenge I had been given. The idea was to reflect my feelings through photographs during my stay there; we would also photograph my face each time, as a way of not forgetting my identity despite the physical changes that my appearance might undergo during the process. That's how it all started, almost like a game. Every other day, I sought an image in my confined surroundings that would symbolise what was going on inside me. Without having seen the printed result, the image remained like a negative in my mind, until it was eventually revealed in the form of written lines that escaped from my fingers as if the act of pressing the shutter button had unleashed an unstoppable mechanism.

Carlos gave me a new way of looking—photography—and this, almost instinctively, allied itself with my other voice: the written word, providing the tangle of thoughts, fears and concerns that boiled inside me with a "channel" (another coincidence?) through which to flow. The result is in your hands and in the sentences that introduce this text.

Rosa took photographs of her process, of the exterior, but also of herself in order, as she says, not to forget her identity in spite of the physical changes, so as not to lose sight of who she was, who she is and who she can become. It is a moving book that makes us see that illnesses do not exist; rather, there are people who are ill, and over and above being ill, these are people who are unique. Sometimes scared, sometimes desperate, but often hopeful.



// 19 May 2000 //18. *Dos tesoros* [two treasures]

ATRA is my great ally: thanks to ATRA, my illness has a very good prognosis. With the help of other drugs, induction therapy with this small two-toned pearl has already achieved complete remission. Not only have my bone marrow cells stabilised, but the molecular alteration of my genes has been corrected. Quite a triumph. But this precious pearl does not float in the air all by itself: it is held aloft in a hand, a left hand, which is meant to represent the importance in healing of factors that are not solely scientific. The emotional help received, the inner journey throughout this time travelled, the ghosts of memory, finally exorcised... a heavy burden without which it has been much easier to swim to the surface and gulp in a deep breath of pure air which, in the form of small two-toned pearls, circulates through my body to restore my health, so that the result of the cellular and molecular analysis of my marrow is a faithful reflection of my being.



// 4 August 2000 //38. *El mirador del centinela* [the sentry's lookout]

This place, christened with the same name as the title, after a story I shall keep to myself, is a small hill in the countryside near my home. I often go for a walk in the late afternoon, accompanied by my dogs, my cat and a book. Sitting on a concrete block, I bear witness to the passage of time until nightfall, my attention divided between reading, the smells and sounds of the countryside and the sighting of a rabbit making the most of the last days of the

closed season. Bees are also abundant, as there are hives nearby. One of their inhabitants is responsible for the fact that my face is now misshapen thanks to the effects of a sting. You shall therefore allow me, perhaps in a ridiculous gesture of vanity, to hide my face from the camera today. A couple of days ago, when I was at the sentry's lookout watching the sunset and accompanied by my beloved animals, I was flooded by a warm feeling of plenitude. I felt that I had no need to aspire to any more in life, that in that moment I had everything I needed, precisely because I knew that I didn't need anything. At any rate, that's how I try to explain the feeling I was experiencing, because in that moment everything was summed up in one sentence that, out of context, might be difficult to understand. The real title of the photograph that represents that moment is *Ya me puedo morir* [I can die now].



// 28 August 2000 //46. *Casi te puedo tocar* [I can almost touch you]

Today, finally, my neutrophil count is up. The comeback begins. I feel as if I can now see the end of the road, something that until now was always far away. After this, at the very least, the fragile tower will not be demolished again in order to start building another identical one to knock down. It will be a start, but in a new direction: that of normality, which will never be normal again, flowing down the river again, but with new waters. As I advance by stages, everything takes shape and begins to have an overall sense. Today I am aware that I am healing. You are there, very close, if I stretch out my hand I can almost touch you.

Artist's books are proof of the power of the creative process to tell our stories, in an exercise of new lucidity and reconfiguration. They are, therefore, important examples for teaching reflection, since there is nothing like education to connect us with the other, make us responsible for him or her and reconfigure us as beings who accompany the story, the other's story.

Photo-Narration in the Configuration of Teachers

In relation to the above, Connelly and Clandinin (1995) have noted that humans are “storytellers”: we inhabit lives that are or should be inserted in a story through which we experience the world. Thus, in line with Mateos and Núñez (2011), narrative is directly related to the representation we construct of the personal and social world in different ways and forms:

- It is a way of ordering our experience of life and giving it meaning: “Through narrative, humans project the interpretation of events, actions and situations and confer meaning and significance to their own experience” (Mateos & Núñez, 2011, p. 121).
- It is involved in the way we experience the world and contains practical knowledge. As Colom and Mèlich (2003) have observed, there is a two-way relationship between narrative and life. On the one hand, narrative refers to life, since the process of creating and composing a story is carried out by the reader. In this sense, reading is a way of living, just as telling and reading stories is to live them in the world of the imagination. On the other hand, life itself refers to narrative insofar as it entails not only biological development, but also the accumulation of a biography, story or tale whose text can be interpreted and experienced in different ways (2003, p. 121). Events or actions must be organised into the plots or arguments of a narrative story with meaning and significance.
- It is an instrument to transmit one’s own and other people’s experience, acting as a mediator of the education-culture connection. Within oral cultures, narrative plays an important role as the main intellectual and practical tool for the transmission of knowledge (Colom & Mèlich, 2003).

It is from this premise, from the need to tell our stories, that “emancipatory narratives” arise (McEwan, 1997), stories that free our thought from the pressure to conform and from established narrative, providing the means to express and create new meanings that thus become a restructuring and permit a re-reading in other terms.

Starting from this position, narrative allows for deconstruction and constitution, in line with Derrida. A deconstructionist stance activates participants’ capacity to subvert the definitions, roles and constructs that society has established. A constitutionalist stance, on the other hand, suggests that lives and identities are constructed from the meanings that people give to the account of their experiences; from the language that they select to express it, together with the vocabulary they use to narrate their lives; and from the position or hierarchy that people occupy in the social structure in which they participate and the power relations that this entails (Carr, 1998).

Reflecting on these three factors—meaning, language and power relations—helps to identify and take apart the subalternities imposed by others that at a given moment have produced isolation or emotional discord.

Similarly, according to White, the methods used in narrative therapy can be very useful in education and therapy when:

- We adopt an advisory position of collaborative co-authorship.
- We help participants to see themselves as separate from their problems by externalising the problem.
- We help participants identify the moments in their lives when they were not oppressed by their problems because they found unique outcomes.
- We reframe our participants' descriptions as action scenarios and awareness scenarios.
- We link unique outcomes to other past events and help extend the story into the future to form an alternative, giving preference to a self-narrative in which the self is seen as more powerful than the problem.
- We invite significant members of the participants' social network to share this new self-narrative.
- We document new knowledge and practices that support the new self-narrative using literary means.
- We allow others, who are also trapped by similar oppressive narratives, to benefit from their new knowledge through feedback (Carr, 1998).

Narrative mobilises aspects that help us to look at ourselves from other perspectives beyond those where we have been located or have unconsciously located ourselves. Thus, photo-biography (Sanz, 2015) helps to extract and exteriorise internal chaos and pain, giving it form through language—whether written, drawn, dramatised or danced—as we see it outside ourselves: organising it using lines, colours, composition or structure, through verbs, adverbs and adjectives, through rhythms, gestures and movements, to reflect on why some and not others. To give them a new meaning, for this to be shared and to communicate it to others.

Autoethnography in the Configuration of the Teaching Profession

In relation to the interpenetration of image and text, Springgay et al. (2005) have described *a/r/tography* as an approach to interpreting the self by means of living inquiry through art and text. Such inquiry endows our experience with more than a single meaning: loss, shift and rupture are foundational concepts that allow new meanings to emerge, and this double meaning includes the creation of art and words. These are not, therefore, “discourses laid on top of one another in the hopes of transferring meaning from one textual realm to another; rather, they are interconnections that speak in conversation with, in, and through art and text such that encounters are constitutive rather than descriptive” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 899).

For many years, I have been encouraging my students to construct narratives that bring reflectivity and emancipation into play. I started when I was teaching the optional subject “Intercultural Arts Education” for primary education. Before thinking about how to plan a class of diverse students, I asked them to open their family albums and, in their artist's book, to ask the photographs inside (of their

great-grandparents, grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, parents, cousins) where they had been born, where they had lived and why they had moved, what events were depicted, what had been hidden in that mythical image that is the photo album and where they were in the photographs of family celebrations or rather, where they had been placed. In addition, I asked them to map their families' movements throughout Spain, Europe or the world. The result also had to be creative, and in it they had to reflect on why they had chosen to take my course in the Faculty of Education. Furthermore, they would have to show it to their peers. The result was surprising, not only for them, but also for me. Confirming my experiential knowledge, all the autoethnographies (in the sense of autobiographical narratives discussed in the preceding chapters) showed that we are migratory beings driven by hunger, political repression or love. In addition, the students discovered things about their family histories that they would never have known if they had not participated in the activity. Some discovered the pain of grandparents and great-grandparents who had been imprisoned, orphaned or abandoned in a harsh post-war period. Others discovered letters that their relatives had fondly but fearfully kept and now showed to the younger generation. On many occasions, they sat down for the first time with their grandmothers, with the photographs in front of them, and listened to their stories attentively. The activity helped them to know who they were, where they came from, what they were repeating or what they were rebelling against.

Since then, for more than fifteen years I have been repeating this activity with my students, whatever the subject. I ask them who they are and why they are here. I think it is an exercise in professional but also existential identity. In many cases, they are looking back for the first time, to find out where they come from and to think about the expectations that others—generally their parents, but also themselves and society—have of them. Many discovered that they were the first generation in their family to go to university, others that they were the second generation not to have experienced hunger. Almost all of them found there had been loss and grief, and more of them than I had imagined uncovered traces of domestic violence hidden among the most unfathomable secrets.

Two Cases of Autoethnography in Primary School Teacher Training

To complete this text, I wrote to some former students with whom I had worked some years ago, asking their permission to show images from their autoethnographies. Most of them took no more than a few hours to respond, thanking me for the opportunity to show their work: their images were stored not only on their computers, but also in their symbolic memory. I think that reflects meaningful learning. I could show many, but I have chosen two. Thank you Coral Pámpano and Marta Fraile, for letting me share a fragment of your lives. They spent many hours with me on the Master's Degree in Art Therapy and Education for Social Inclusion, at the Complutense University of Madrid Faculty of Education.

Coral Pámpano created an autoethnography entitled *Piola*. She says:

“Piola” is a word that was used, and I hope will continue to be used, in the area where I live to declare time-out during a game: during hide-and-seek or tag, you shouted “Piola!” and you were free to stop the game. This, together with the implicit meaning of returning to my home, to my roots, forms the title for the collection of poems and writings that I have been accumulating. (Pámpano, 2017)

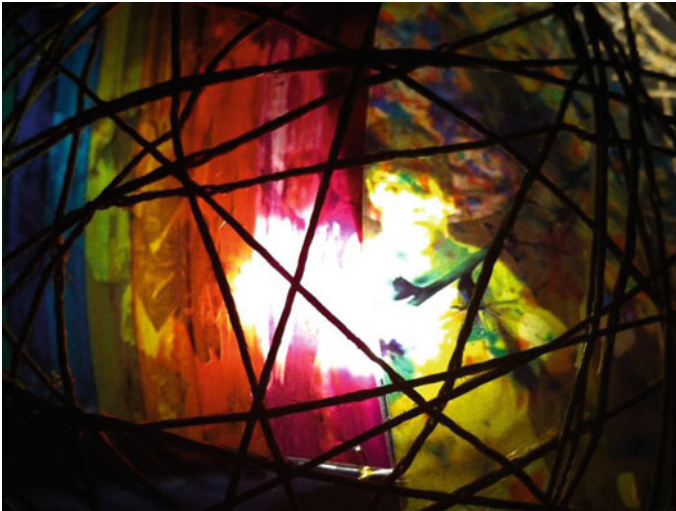


Fragments from *Piola*

Via subtle images delicately placed in a small book and accompanied by poems, she journeys through her life. In a way, returning to the past is to adopt a stance towards the future: clear, self-reflective, with roots. Meaningful.

Marta Fraile created a sphere of images, representing her identity:

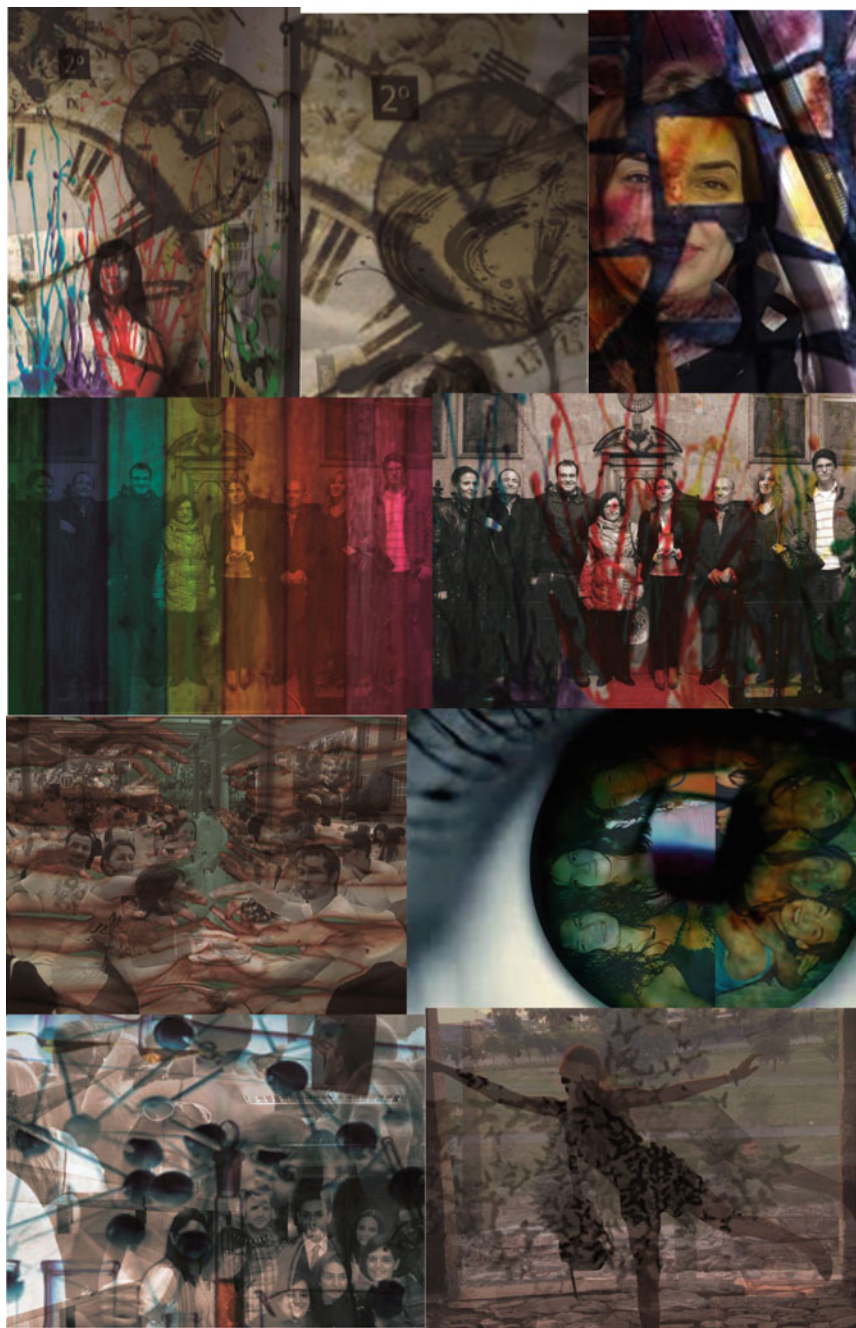
To be born again. The first thing I thought of when I wanted to represent my world was definitely a kind of sphere, not closed, of segments and pieces. The sphere is one of the most universal and natural forms. The earth, the sun, the planets, our cells, our atoms or electrons. It's the form that contains all other forms, the "Cosmic Egg", eternity. The cycles, the rhythms and their eternal movement. It is, therefore, totality, integrity and fulfilment. A sphere is made up of circles that close in on themselves and it therefore represents unity, the absolute, perfection. It is a symbol of heaven in relation to earth, of the spiritual in relation to the material. It is related to 'protection'. (Fraile, Autoethnography, 2016)



She writes:

Nowadays, I feel that I am made of bits and pieces, of experiences, of all the people who have passed through my life (...) of summer afternoons in the village, with my grandmother, with my bicycle, of the void of my grandfather. Of endless songs that will always dance to the sound of the August sun and the spotlights of the summer festivities. Of my friends. Of attachment to what one has experienced, which sometimes exceeds the desire to continue living.

Of feeling, of the pain of my illness and the rupture it caused in my life. Of dates that are engraved on my mind, of the pain of absences. Of broken glass. Of you Natalia, my shooting star who left me recently, on 1 July 2015, leaving me speechless, of your courage, strength and will to live in the face of our illness, of the tremendous lesson that your smile gave me in the face of life and death. (Fraile, 2016)



Fragmentos de Autoetnografía. Marta Fraile

Photographic autoethnographies, complex and subtle artist's books, ask questions but only partially answer them, in an uncertainty that helps in the seeking rather than the finding. They plunge into the depths of identity construction, into the story of life, into its whys and wherefores. On this path, the creative action, the creative process, has the virtue of simultaneously opening and structuring, showing and offering a way of thinking that is united to emotion and therefore, dares to think anew: in a body, from a biography, for others.

These autoethnographies, or autobiographical narratives, are based on the assumption that narratives do not represent or reflect identities, lives and problems, but instead construct them (Bruner, 1986, 1987, 1991). The subject authorises his or her "own voice", transforming it into an essential element to articulate information and interpretation. Knowledge thus constructs a form of narration about life, society and the world in general (Rivas, 2010). In accordance with this stance, the process of being once again the "author" of a personal narrative not only reflects but can also help change lives and perceptions of problems and identities, because personal narratives construct identity (Carr, 1998), identity being a forever unfinished, mobile and complex concept. The concept of identity acts as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that it is possible to define it in terms of mutual interaction (Rivas, 2010).

As we saw in the previous chapter, for decades, the narrative approach has also been used to inquire into teaching knowledge that will help teachers improve their practice, employing various methods and tools. An example of this is the case of Father Manjón (1900), the founder of the *Ave Maria Schools*, and the importance he gave to keeping diaries in which teachers and students could record the most important events that happened in the schools (Mateos & Núñez, 2011). According to these authors, narrative "implies entering not only into the terrain of what is happening, from these scenarios, but also into the subjective dimension from which these educational actors give meaning to reality" (Mateos & Núñez, 2011, p. 114). This is so because, as Lisette Model is quoted as saying on the National Gallery of Canada website (2019), "the camera is an instrument of detection. We photograph not only what we know, but also what we don't know".

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