

Synopsis:

FROM SHADOW TO LIGHT

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Photography workshop – CSAPA Clemenceau
(Care and support centre for the prevention of addiction)
Gagny - France

Since 2011, I have been working as a photographer with people who are socially excluded and who receive care in social and medico-social establishments. I offer them a therapeutic approach based on restoring confidence and self-esteem. The idea is to use photography as a tool to encourage exchanges and develop creativity and self-expression.

The workshop is held in social establishments every other week. The long-term continual activity allows the physical and psychological evolution of the patients to be recorded photographically. A photograph is a reflection of the present, yet it also allows for future perspectives to be envisaged.

The sessions:

During the first session, no photos are taken. It is just a stage for observation (to arouse the participants' curiosity for the equipment and for a shooting session) and for exchanges, the individuals are free to come and go.

The participants expect more from the second session as they have gathered information from the other residents about my activities as a photographer. Some continue to observe, others make slight movements and try different poses in front of the camera or comment instead on the existing pictures. The camera holds their attention throughout the two hours of the session.

During the third session, the participants pose as they wish in front of the camera. This first pose is "consensual", something socially recognized in order to establish themselves amongst their new peers and for them it serves as a test. The comments made by their peers are a way for the individual to assess themselves; they are exposed to other people's judgement.

The fourth session is when the first prints are eagerly awaited. The portraits are looked at and quickly put away in a pocket to be studied later in private. Some photos will appear on the walls or doors of their bedrooms. This session is no longer about posing but about showing themselves as they are, lost and in search of themselves. The session is about focusing on oneself. This first picture will be authentic, allowing them to see themselves, recognize themselves and envisage their future selves. The photograph is a way to be exposed not only to others but moreover to oneself. It is evidence that they are involved in their care.

The fifth session is dedicated to creation, the expression of oneself. It is no longer about seeing oneself but about expressing and distinguishing oneself, communicating with the observer, whoever they may be. With the warm atmosphere, the subdued light and the photographer centered on the individual, a photo studio becomes a good environment to establish trust. Conversation develops under the pretext of capturing the right picture. They pay close attention to each other and the therapeutic alliance is born.

The final session is dedicated to group pictures. The group acts as a mirror, the places and the roles are determined by the way they behave towards each other – towards their colleagues. The presence of the group allows for short scenes that represent daily situations to be acted out.

The photographs allow the participants to be aware of their bodies and their self-image. Confidence is restored over the course of the workshop sessions, and this is soon followed by a growth in self-esteem. The poses become reflections of their personalities and an experimental field of their emotions: fear, anxiety, ambivalence, joy. The aim is to show the participants a positive reflection of themselves. It strikes me as important to give these people an opportunity to see and perceive themselves differently, so that they are able to reconcile themselves with their own image as they see it develop over the course of the workshop sessions.