

THE PHOTO THAT HEALS

Elle magazine Belgium | November 2016

« A photo is a paper medium covered with emotions. » The quote is from Canadian Judy Weiser, a pioneer in phototherapy. If the words « treatment by light » comes to you directly, forget it. Here, it is a question of using photography as a therapeutic tool. The discipline, practiced since the Seventies in the Anglo-Saxon countries, is slowly beginning to emerge in Belgium. Better late than never, right? But what does it consist of? Its most famous form is the sessions designed to boost self-confidence. And women are the first beneficiaries: years to be bombarded with images of perfect bodies, smooth, carved and shaped, it leaves traces. (...)

Émilie Danchin, a Brussels phototherapist, makes the same observation. Passionate about photography and psychology, she studied philosophy at ULB before becoming a therapist. In her office in Jette, which also serves as studio, people who come to see her are between 13 and 80 years old. Two thirds of them are women, and the reasons for their coming are very varied. Phototherapy is used to treat problems of self-confidence but also eating disorders, depression, burn-out, chronic fatigue, baby blues or addictions...

But Émilie Danchin does not systematically uses her camera. She sometimes works with pictures taken by her patients or with images from databases. The photo is then used as a support for dialogue and reflection. Your sexy selfies can tell a lot about you... « I often present several images and ask the person to select one. The choice will not be innocent and from there we can begin to discuss. If a teenager has big relationship problems with his family, it is interesting to ask him to take pictures with his parents, brothers and sisters. I will see how he sets himself up, what he wants to show me, consciously or unconsciously » says the phototherapist.

She compares the photo to the famous madeleine of Proust: « The emotional reactions can be very strong. Some patients are surprised to cry so much or have a cough crisis. When one looks at a cliché of oneself, one tilts at a certain time, one revisits the experiences and the sensations of the moment. On the level of memory, we are in direct contact with everything that is

stored silently in us, everything that could not be verbalized or inscribed because it was too traumatic. » If photography is used as a therapeutic tool, it is also because it is a tangible medium. It is a true certificate of authenticity, a « mirror of reality ». If you are told that unicorns exist, you will doubt (or not, do not judge). But if you are shown a Polaroid of the magical creature, part of your brain will believe it.

Émilie Danchin says phototherapy will emerge in the coming years in Belgium. Since 2014, she has already trained sixty people in this discipline in Belgium. She also works regularly with asylum seekers and explains that phototherapy has already proved its worth on numerous occasions. The story of a woman who came to Belgium to flee the war particularly affected her. « She lost everything, her husband was assassinated. For her, her life was over. In her upbringing, existence makes sense only if one is a married woman, so she did not project herself otherwise. I took a picture of her, alone and peaceful, in the forest. In her country, she could not go to the woods because of the military. This cliché helped her to realize that another life was possible, that she could be blossomed without a man by her side. »

TESTIMONY

Pascale Darson, 43, former visual director of a Swiss magazine

« The year I was 40, I learned that I had breast cancer. I decided I was going to write a blog about it. I told my story logbook way and I took pictures of all the stages of my illness. Most of the time, they were self-portraits. I was documenting visits to the doctor, for example, chemo sessions, the day my companion cut off my hair, and so on. My blog was never perfect enough for my taste, so I did not put it online. But it did me good to take pictures, the images allow to leave a trace. I began to take an interest in the camera as a therapeutic tool.

At the time I did not even know that it was a discipline. It was important to make the photos myself, but I was also shot by Émilie Danchin. I felt beneficial in the long run. For me, it's just as effective as a conventional therapy. This allowed me to create a distance between reality and myself. I was trying to put a lot of humor into my pictures. My companion is bald, I had him pose with my wig. At that time, I was no longer undergoing the illness, I was in action. And I was talking to people, that meant I was still alive. To make photos, it allows to create the link with the others, to communicate differently with its entourage.

Social isolation was very hard during my cancer. I did four magazines a month, I had a team to manage and I suddenly found myself alone. I was not even allowed to drive. I thought if I did not make pictures, I was going to die. Thanks to that, I became active again, I was no longer simply a woman waiting for results in the hospital. I was playing to direct myself, I asked the nurses to participate, and so on. The atmosphere is lighter and the mind can think of something else. The camera then becomes a transitional object, a cuddly toy. As I was two and a half years old, I could not carry around with a teddy bear. Instead, I took my camera away so that I would not be afraid. He never left me. »