

UOC

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# The image as a form of knowledge

Inaugural lecture for the  
2018/2019 academic year

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Interview between **Jordi Sánchez-Navarro**,  
Dean of the UOC's Faculty of Information  
and Communication Sciences, and **Cristina  
de Middel**, photographer and winner  
Spain's *Premio Nacional de Fotografía*.

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**In Barcelona, 19 September 2018**

<http://w.uoc.edu/inaugural18>  
#UOCinaugural

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Universitat Oberta  
de Catalunya

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A portrait of a man with white hair and a beard, wearing red-rimmed glasses and a suit. The image is overlaid with a blue tint and white text.

# 01

# Introduction

## 05

The role of universities goes way beyond details such as financial results or graduate numbers. While the figures do hold some importance, a notable example being the UOC having 50,000 students enrolled for the first time, we must remember what is most important is what happens on a daily basis in each and every one of our classrooms, where learning processes prepare our students for the careers ahead of them, where we give fresh impetus to the wealth of people's experiences, and lay foundations for future development. In a nutshell: holding true to our past roots, we are working in the present to prepare for tomorrow.

Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard until just a few weeks ago, elucidated this point, saying "Universities make commitments to the timeless. [...] We strive to understand who we are, where we

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came from, where we are going and why.” Hence the need to furnish ourselves with tools for learning to learn, for critical thinking and for lifelong learning, elements essential to any society that is to be democratic, informed and free.

Indeed, in this year’s absorbing inaugural lecture, the famed photographer Cristina de Middel stresses the importance of taking a critical and informed perspective when interpreting the avalanche of images and information we now receive, so we can take rational positions and understand grounds and motives. In our fully interconnected world, our society with its unlimited access to data, and our public arena in which truths, falsehoods and uncertainties swim side by side, it is imperative we have the communicative competencies needed to be active and critical participants.

We need to educate ourselves as consumers, as spectators, and as citizens, but also as senders of messages. To paraphrase de Middel, one of our obligations as a university – and one of our objectives at the UOC – is to teach our students to communicate and share their thoughts, knowledge and creations. Today more than ever, to communicate means giving your point of view – respectfully, critically, and with courage.

Have an excellent academic year 2018/2019!

**Josep A. Planell**

UOC President

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# U2

## Understanding our world through pictures



The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya's (UOC) inaugural lecture marks the beginning of the academic year. It also serves as a yearly opportunity for the UOC community to engage in debate and reflection, guided by an outstanding figure of expertise who can help us better understand our reality. For this academic year 2018/2019 we welcomed Cristina de Middel, a photographer who recently won Spain's *Premio Nacional de Fotografia* (the country's highest official accolade for photography) and is in the process of joining the Magnum Photos international photographic co-operative.

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On this occasion our guest speaker was joined by Jordi Sánchez-Navarro, Dean of the UOC's Faculty of Information and Communication Sciences. Their conversation explored the role of images in society today, the dividing lines between reality and representation, and how we need to maintain a critical stance.

In these pages you will find both the video and a transcription of the interview between Cristina de Middel and Jordi Sánchez-Navarro.



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## In short



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“The great challenge of this century will be to make people visually literate.”

“As images are such accurate, mechanical representations of reality, they have that power of truth. But of course, the person clicking the camera waits for a specific moment and then chooses how to frame it according to their intentions.”

“What took me away from photojournalism was the need to talk in the first person, to not have to be neutral, to take a position.”

“Trying to explain the world as it is now with tools from fifty years ago would

be completely ridiculous. Our vision and understanding of the world has to change and photography has to adapt.”

“I don’t see more value in one photo, because I took it at a certain moment, than another that was imagined and staged.”

“We’re living in a time when you have to keep thinking all the time. If you don’t understand properly the reasons why things are happening, you’re a puppet.”

“I think it’s hugely important now to encourage people to question things, more than it is to offer answers.”

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/t1V6ndbnCus>

### Dossier

Selection of links and content relating to Cristina de Middel, put together by the UOC Library:

<http://biblioteca.uoc.edu/en/resources/cristina-de-middel>

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# U4

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# The conversation



*Jordi Sánchez-Navarro*

Dean of the UOC's Faculty of Information  
and Communication Sciences

*Cristina de Middel*

Photographer and winner Spain's *Premio  
Nacional de Fotografía*



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## Telling stories

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**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

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First, I'd just like to thank you for agreeing to give the inaugural lecture for the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya's 2018/19 academic year. And thank you especially for doing it here, surrounded by images, because we're going to be talking about the inflation of images in today's society, in contemporary culture. And who better to do it with than you? A creator of images. A creator who believes in images and who has worked with them for many years. One who has achieved excellent results that are acclaimed worldwide.

I'd like to start by talking a bit about how you got here. Let's talk about your education, and you can tell us about the extent to which it matches what you would go on to do later in your career. You have a classic education in art, and also in photojournalism, a sort of background that is both technical and artistic... I understand you studied in the USA, in Valencia, in Barcelona... a broad range of experience. I wonder if you can tell us about your education and its value to your career. Looking

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back, how do you view all those decisions that you took back then about your education?

***Cristina de Middel***

I think that education, like everything in life, is a starting point. I mean, you have to have some education when you start out, and you listen to your intuition or to your parents, depending on how your life is at that moment, and you say: OK, I think I want to be this – right? And then you get out there.

But I think it's good not to see the door you're knocking on as the only one. It's a door in a maze, where you keep trying things and you learn more about yourself. You go and find paths where, using your intuition or using your parents again, you can get to the end of the maze, get to become someone who's a well-trained professional, happy with their education. I've seen education as that: as doors in a maze that I've gone knocking on when I've reached those points. They've been essential because they've helped me... well... not only to learn the technical side, to learn the whole of the theory and all of the world bound up in a discipline or a subject, but also to be critical of myself. I mean, to position myself, to say "they're telling me this now, but I don't agree so I'm going to look elsewhere", right? I think it's a good thing; it's information that's put in front of you that you have to use well but not swallow whole without questioning it. Because, ultimately, what you have is a means to educate yourself as a rounded person.

***Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro***

You started out as a photojournalist. You worked in this field for a long time. I read as well, I think I heard you say at the talk you gave at Caixa Forum,

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in Barcelona, that you used to draw, or that initially you liked drawing and that attracted you to photojournalism, the need to express yourself, your ability... What was it that attracted you?

*Cristina de Middel*

A bit of everything I think. In general I always liked telling stories. Telling stories when I learned to draw, telling stories with drawings put into little boxes fascinated me. When I discovered photography, because drawing took an age I thought photography was more practical. It's all a mix. What interests me most is telling stories. What stories? Well, that's what I've discovered over time. There was a time in my life when what interested me was explaining what was going on in the world. Well, I tried it, I did that. That was my time as a photojournalist, but I realized that I wasn't really very comfortable in that world, in the structure of photojournalism. So I carried on searching, within what I liked, which is telling stories in little boxes.

I continued searching until I got to the point where you start educating your voice, educating yourself about what it is you need to say – positioning yourself in terms of all these schools, all this education and all this experience that you have and that you'll go on to have throughout your life – and I found myself saying “how do I tell a story?” Well, I do it the way I like best, with pictures, things placed in boxes that tell a story. What took me away from photojournalism was that need to talk in the first person, to not have to be neutral, to take a position and, above all, to create content that I didn't find in the press. I felt – and still feel – that the information we're given is very biased and that for most of the population the world is very poorly reported. So, well, I thought it was an interesting field of action.

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/k4GkDSTYk9s>

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## Key ideas

“Education is a starting point. It’s a door in a maze where you learn more about yourself. It’s helped me not only to learn the technical side and all the theory bound up in a discipline, but also to be critical of myself.”

“As a photojournalist what interested me was explaining what was going on in the world. What took me away from photojournalism was the need to talk in the first person, to not have to be neutral, to take a position and, above all, to create content that I didn’t find in the press.”





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# Knowing the rules of the game

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**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

What do you think is the role of images in news media? I mean, in mass media, where the media are informing the public, do pictures really have a place? Can we trust an image? Is there truth in journalistic images?

**Cristina de Midde**

If you ask me today, I'd say "no". I think there's relatively little, it's not all there. But then you'd also have to define – another debate we don't have time for today – what truth is. Not even philosophy or science has been able to say what truth means. So photography or the press can't say "the truth is this". No matter what's in the headline, it's all the same; for me, the truth is a construction of many opinions.

It's worth remembering, though, that initially, if you look at the early days of the press, there were very few images and illustrations. The text was what mattered. Text lends itself much more to interpretation. Someone writes a text, you read an article and you can see the writer's name and you say "well they think like that" and it's easier to see the position. As images are such accurate, mechanical representations of reality – if we assume hardly any filters were used with the camera – images have that power of truth, they resemble the reality that we consume every day. Hence the confusion. Because of course, the person clicking the camera waits for a specific moment and then chooses how to frame it according to their intentions, be they good, bad, or neither. But they have their intentions. The confusion comes in part

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from that illusion of reality that photos create.

I think we're going head-first into an age of image where words will become increasingly less important and images increasingly more. That's why it's also very necessary for people to start learning, start being critical when it comes to the images they consume. If you think for example of a news channel like Euronews, they sometimes show three minutes of images, with no words, just the images. It's very disconcerting but you come away with the sensation of having been there much more than if they were telling you about it. That's what I think the power of the image is. The power of the image in movement, the power of photography. When you leave the image in silence, the image alone, and you show what's there, I think it also creates a very interesting sense of confusion.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Of course the sound is important in those particular segments in which there are no words spoken; there is still sound that accompanies it.

**Cristina de Middel**

The ambient sound seems to take you there. And it's a very brave decision, but also a very intelligent one by whoever came up with it. Because, for me, it's the only way to convey that truth that we expect from images. For me especially, as I'm really into all this, I start watching the news or reading a newspaper thinking "OK, what's this one trying to tell me, where do they want to take me and how do they want to influence me?" Also I think that in recent months in Spain we've seen very telling examples of how audiences can be manipulated with headlines or certain images. And it's very sad, however, if you show just the images with ambient sound, what

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would happen then? What would people think? It'd be interesting...

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

It would be interesting, of course, because images that are stripped of rhetoric, they too suddenly acquire their own rhetoric.

**Cristina de Middel**

They do: their eye witness aspect, taking you there. They're not telling it to you, which is what the news programmes do, they tell you. No, you're there first-hand rather than just being told.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Talking to you, we have to discuss questions such as truth, the dividing lines between truth and representation, between reality and representation. Because when you were awarded Spain's national photography prize, one of the reasons behind the jury's decision was that you're a creator, an artist who highlights the tensions and the conflicting relationships between truth and representation. I think it's the job of all of all photographers and, I'd almost say, all of those who think in images. But it really is a key issue, the issue of the moment.

You said you've been saying for decades that we're living in the age of images, but clearly it wasn't like it is now. Right now, when it's all images, it's interesting to think about those dividing lines, isn't it?

**Cristina de Middel**

Yes, it's important, especially that people realize this. I think, well, if the beginning of the last century was a time of teaching people to be literate, making sure everyone learned to read, to understand the coding of written words, and how

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they're pronounced. Then the great challenge of this century will be to make people visually literate. To make sure they know what images mean, why they're appearing in front of them when they turn the page in their newspaper.

And I think that bit by bit we're learning, if you look closely, especially with television, like when a woman is shown washing her hair under a waterfall and she ends up looking gorgeous like she's just had a two-hour massage, just because she's washed her hair with a certain brand of shampoo, people buying the shampoo at their local supermarket know that when they wash their hair they're not going to be under a waterfall or have the same complexion she's got. We know that much already. We know what the language of advertising is, we've learned that.

Now, the lesson we have to learn, as we've moved on to the next screen, is to start understanding the news; who decides the news, why they want us to think this, why some say this and others say that. And you can get along fine on your own. Now, the truth is I don't follow the Spanish press much. But when I left Spain, you could read in one newspaper, for example, that Rajoy had lowered pensions, in another that he'd raised them, while another didn't even mention it. You could see it on the same news stand, one next to the other. So, the truth is what you want it to be, right? It's also the truth that you project, that you need... So, knowing what the rules of the game are, everyone should know how to play and there shouldn't be any unnecessary victims.

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/dYLiOpgUJHw>

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## Key ideas

“As images are such accurate, mechanical representations of reality, they have that power of truth. But of course, the person clicking the camera waits for a specific moment and then chooses how to frame it according to their intentions.”

“We’re entering an age of image where words will become increasingly less important and images increasingly more. That’s why it’s also very necessary for people to start being critical when it comes to the images they consume.”

“The great challenge of this century will be to make people visually literate.”





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# Perspective, truth and fiction

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**Jordi**  
*Sánchez-Navarro*

It's the constant debate about the truth, not as something that exists outside people's arguments, but as a construction of their arguments. That's why it's very interesting when artists, creators or photographers – as in your case – highlight that the truth is constructed via a perspective, with staging. In fact, in that transition you make between photography that is more documentary and photography that is more staged, I think we see some very interesting tensions there.

**Cristina de Middel**

I don't want to generalize, because there are also superb professionals who do everything by the book and do it extremely well. But I think that all images are constructed, except the ones being taken by that robot they sent to Mars, which they're controlling and which will be sending us images over the years...

**Jordi**  
*Sánchez-Navarro*

Okay, but someone decides the framing...

**Cristina de Middel**

Okay, someone will decide. But, ultimately, you choose the moment you take the photo, even if you're in a war zone. And you sometimes even wait for a play on perspective where it looks like someone jumps just as the bomb goes off and, in the end, you're creating a composition that is aesthetically interesting. You take aesthetic decisions when you're documenting something that's real, situations where people could be dying. And they're suffering but you're thinking about the composition, but you know that if you're not prioritizing that, you're going to end up with an

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image that won't have any impact. The mere fact of having to decide aesthetically how to relay something that isn't particularly aesthetic, that says it all. In the end it's a construction.

Looking at war photography, perhaps Capa could take a stroll along the front, stop for a while with one side and then for a while with the other... then go somewhere else. Maybe he could do that. But not now. Not now you can't. Now you have zones and you have to be with either one side or the other, and then you have to pass the photos through their filter and then the publication itself has its own filters. So with all that, from the experience of the photographer – who sets out full of good intentions – through to the audience, there are so many filters, so much manipulation; so if that's not construction...

I play with that construction. I state that from the outset. I make it obvious, I take it to such extremes that the issue becomes the construction. But really what I do is highlight something that – on a smaller scale, perhaps not talked about much – I think almost all creators and people producing videos and photos do; the construction I mean – we're all constructing. The thing is, that's what my work is all about.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Your job is to say it, to think about it. Say it and think about it.

**Cristina de Middel**

Yes, above all to make us think about it.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Regarding what we said about documentary photography versus staged photography, there's

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an interesting story about you joining Magnum, which, as we know, Magnum is where all the stars are in the world of documentary photography and photographic truth. Tell us the story – well, one of the stories, there must be more – about joining Magnum.

### *Cristina de Middel*

It was the first, because I didn't really know what I was getting into, and the truth is I expected more reactions from people. I don't hide the fact that I like to question images' graphic content, and here I'm sharing a platform with, as you said, the stars and those who helped construct this immense value photography has contributed to the documenting of history.

But one of the first photographers who wrote to me with the first question, which was one of the ones I'd been expecting, was Abbas, who sadly died a few months ago... and I'm glad to have met him and known him. And he asked me "Cristina, I couldn't be at the vote and I wanted to know why you, someone who focuses above all on fiction, want to join Magnum, which above all is about truth." It's one thing to be you and me here talking, go to a bar or a debate, and I explain it to you and convince you – because I'm good at convincing people – that we have to question images and that documentary photography isn't enough. It's one thing for me to take my crowd who already listen to me, and give them more reasons. But it's something else for Abbas to come to you, someone who's spent his life going from one war to the next and has taken iconic images we all recognize, and for him to ask "So you, what have you got?" So that was the first time... We talked a bit and it helped me position myself a bit, to know not what I need to say, but what I can say and how I can explain what I'm doing there; well, what

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I'm doing is something that has won me followers. Now I've been lucky enough to meet almost all the members of Magnum. The question keeps getting asked and...

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

How did you convince Abbas?

**Cristina de Middel**

Well, I don't know if I did convince Abbas. Each of us does what we like. I think Abbas was fully convinced by his photography till the day he stopped. And the same will be true of me. The problem is I'm not opposed to his and he's not opposed to mine. I think there has to be harmony. The argument I gave him was that documentary photography isn't enough to understand the world we live in. That just by taking a photo of what's going on in the moment, even if you don't manipulate it, you don't understand why it's happened or what's going to happen without any text. And I think it's interesting to experiment with fiction, look for the archetypes, the clichés, the stereotypes, and include them in the image so the person viewing the image can have more additional context of the decisive moment and feel closer, so the photograph is better. That relates to two of the driving ideas behind Cartier Bresson and Robert Capa, who founded Magnum.

An analogy I always use is that the house of photography has been standing for a long time and it's wonderful and there are loads of photographers there documenting the world. Now we've had a period of making some extensions. We've made a west wing for us photographers who... we don't want to kick the others out or occupy the house, nothing like that, it's just the house has become bigger and there's room for us all. Also because the world is

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much more complex, we have many more tools, so trying to explain the world as it is now with tools from fifty years ago would be completely ridiculous. Our vision and understanding of the world has to change and photography has to adapt. Not adapting as in shedding our skin and becoming something else; simply expanding, because the world has many more layers. It's not a conflict, it's not one against the other; it's just that now there's room for more. I'm not after you, you do what you want. I'm here to do what I want, and everyone should do what they want, which is what the whole world should be doing.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Maybe it's not so much a rival approach, rather an approach that complements that of those who want to document the world. You're the ones who want to interpret the world, perhaps?

**Cristina de Middel**

It's exactly that. I mean there are huge debates among photographers, because they're really, really dogmatic. If you're black and white, if you're colour, if you're analogue, if you're digital, if you're documentary, if you're fiction... It's all the same... Every two months it's something new, whether you're serious or not... Luckily, I'm into all of it and I have a great time.

For me, a photographer is a super-communicator. They're someone who controls a tool and is able to translate things they see into things they think, someone who communicates and shares with others. As long as you're not trying to trick people, as long as I don't then say "look, the ones who went to Zambia in 1964 in *Afronautas* were in fact these people". That's no good. But if I present it as an illustration, then it's just the same as the movies

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have always done, isn't it? I mean, for example, the story of who killed Osama Bin Laden, there are no press images. Who gave us that story, who filled that visual library that we all have about how Bin Laden died? It was a film that came later. Well, it's a bit like that. There are gaps where images are missing, some images are unreliable, some haven't been backed up... Take the controversy about Capa's falling soldier photo: we still don't even know where it was taken, or if it was staged. It doesn't alter the fact it's an image that describes the Spanish Civil War very well, right? Regardless of whether or not it was staged.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

In fact, it gives an extra layer of mystery to images that makes them even more interesting.

**Cristina de Middel**

I think so. I think an image survives also because, although perhaps it has that doubt, it retains its potency. It's a good image, it doesn't matter whether it's staged or not. I don't see more value in one photo, because I took it at a certain moment, than another that was imagined and staged. To capture that image at a certain moment, maybe you had to take three thousand photos until you got a good one. Well, I've had to think three thousand hours until I got a good one. It's the same thing.

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/ILD3pEJ9m0s>

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## Key ideas

“You choose the moment you take the photo, even if you’re in a war zone. You sometimes even wait for a play on perspective where it looks like someone jumps just as the bomb goes off and, in the end, you’re creating a composition that is aesthetically interesting. You take aesthetic decisions when you’re documenting something that’s real.”

“From the experience of the photographer – who sets out full of good intentions – through to the audience, there are so many filters, so much manipulation; so if that’s not construction...”

“I play with that construction. I make it obvious, I take it to such extremes that the issue becomes the construction.”

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“Documentary photography isn’t enough to understand the world we live in. Just by taking a photo of what’s going on in the moment, you don’t understand why it’s happened or what’s going to happen without any text. I think it’s interesting to experiment with fiction, look for the archetypes, the clichés, the stereotypes, and include them in the image so the person viewing it can have more additional context of the decisive moment.”

“A photographer is a super-communicator. They’re someone who controls a tool and is able to translate things they see into things they think, someone who communicates and shares with others.”



“An image survives because it retains its potency. I don’t see more value in one photo, because I took it at a certain moment, than another that was imagined and staged.”



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# Swimming against the current

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**Jordi Sánchez-Navarro**

You mentioned *Afronautas*, one of your works that I think everyone still knows you for. “Oh yes! She did *Afronautas*!” Right? *Afronautas* is interesting, a work in which you document or interpret a very little-known event, an implausible event even. I think you play really well with the plausibility of the event – that is space travel in Zambia, or attempts at space travel in Zambia. And you did it in a book that I think I’m right in saying that you self-published. I’m interested because it leads us to consider your facet as publisher of your own books. As creator of the artefact in which the images are displayed. How did you come to the conclusion that a photo book was the means of expression you needed?

**Cristina de Middel**

Well, I think that was because, at the time I did it, in Spain and the rest of the world there was a serious and widespread crisis in the media, in journalism and newspapers. So, it was a combination of several things. I told the story because it seemed to me very necessary, a lot of fun and, well, necessary not only for me, but I thought that people really needed to think about stereotypes, about the prejudices they have. So in the end, *Afronautas* is not so much about whether the Africans, the Zambians, went to the moon or not, because that story has been around since 1974. *Afronautas* is about the reaction that everyone has on learning that Africans tried to go to the moon, and the reaction is usually one of laughter, of incredulity and, well, often one of condescension. If it had been a Swedish space programme, that wouldn’t have been the case. So, how do you talk about that? About the prejudices

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that people tend to have towards Africans, about what we expect from Africans. What documentary photograph can you use to talk about that problem? You can't. In other words, you can take 500,000 photos in Africa, 500,000 photos in Europe and never be able to explain it, I mean the low expectations we have of Africa. The only way to do it, at least the only way I could think of, was to highlight all the stereotypes, show them clearly and not let people hide their reaction. So, if you laugh, maybe you'll think about why you're laughing...

So, that was one thing, and another, with the crisis of the press, I tried to publish my report in the places where everyone published. Now you go to a refugee camp somewhere, you take the photo and you can easily publish it in any newspaper's Sunday supplement. But that was impossible, they told me "Yeah, well, Africans, great, but we've got no room to print it here." So as I couldn't get them published anywhere, I thought I'd do it myself. I had a grant from the University of Cádiz, from the Kursala, which is a museum, one of the few grants there are for young and emerging photographers in Spain. And with that, the savings I had, and help from Laia Abril and Ramón Pez – who are now also big names in photo books – the three of us set out to do it, without any previous experience, thinking "well if no one's going to publish it, we'll just do it ourselves". Sometimes you have to give blood, sweat and tears, as they say.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

And it became a cult book, which is now a classic and probably quite difficult to buy.

**Cristina de Middel**

Now it's a collector's item that I can't even afford to buy. It's interesting how the project was born out of

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one failure after another... because I was also after a gallery; the gallery said no, that it wasn't the right market and that it was a step back in my language – I didn't even have a language then. But they were simply afraid of the idea, afraid they couldn't sell photos of black people. If I'd got the exhibition in the gallery or got it published, it would've ended there. So from rejection, you tell yourself: keep going, come on, go for it. And then if you make it, you really make it. And if not, crash and burn!

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

In this case, it was part of your journey.

**Cristina de Middel**

Yes. And it also set the tone for me swimming against the current, without me wanting it, because I'm not really someone who wants to disagree with everything. I'm not like that, I just like doing things my way, and it turns out that means swimming against the current. The idea of joining Magnum wasn't a strategy, but a need to say "I need someone to support me, because I can't do it alone." And I'm not the only one working in this vein, but I did need a bit of help, a bit of validation from the big names. And I thought, actually, what I'm doing isn't so dumb.

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

You've spoken of *Afronautas* as way of reflecting on the stereotype we have of what an African country should be like. You've also dealt with the stereotype of masculinity in some works. Is working with these issues, these stereotypes – and setting us against them – an important part of your work and your artistic arguments?

I think so. That work wasn't my last, it was the last-but-one – I work very quickly! But the last work I did about masculinity was in India, at a time when there is this resurgence of women's rights, and all the struggles for equality, which I support of course.

I like playing devil's advocate sometimes. Putting myself on the other side. I don't do it here in Spain, because they'd throw me out. But I was working in India, and I reached a point where the issue I wanted to tackle was working conditions in India. I always try not to work from a gender perspective, I mean, I do a job and I don't think that it's because I'm a woman that I'm telling it this way. I think a man could also tell it the same way. What happened was that when I got there, there was a moment when, because I was a woman, things changed a lot. And it was then that I decided to transform the project completely, because it was something I simply couldn't ignore. I couldn't go out into the street to take photos because I'd have twenty men following me. And that conditions you. I have to show that in some way. So then the project changes and starts to revolve around that. So, at a time when everyone is fighting for women's equality, I start trying to understand men. So that is swimming against the current a bit.

I do the projects or contents I'd like to find in the press, or the book I'd like to buy. I do it to be able to buy it, even though I might not buy it. It's not about going systematically against the current or being systematically anti-establishment. If I have a style, it's being able to change style in every project and being able to change issue. Here, I'm looking with a gender perspective, in another group with a

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racial perspective, in another I'm going against the press, in another against the things I think could be better explained or that I'd like to have explained to me better, so I'm going to go out and look for it and come up with something.

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/C5TLjP71IB0>

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## Key ideas

“*Afronautas* is about the reaction that everyone has on learning that Africans tried to go to the moon, about the prejudices that people tend to have towards Africans.”

“With the crisis of the press, I tried to publish the report in the places where everyone published. But that was impossible. Without any previous experience, we set out to publish a photo book. That set the tone for me swimming against the current.”

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“At a time when everyone is fighting for women’s equality, I start trying to understand men.”



“I do the projects or contents I’d like to find in the press, or the book I’d like to buy.”



# Codes, languages and thought

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Besides the African space programme, I think you like science fiction, B movies and also all that sensationalist press covering mystery stories. It's very interesting how you play with those codes, how you incorporate those codes into your work. Do you like doing this a lot? Do you find it productive to deconstruct genres and levels of art, and to put B movies on a level with fine art?

**Cristina de Middel**

For me, it is. I have very specific tastes. I studied Fine Art and I finished it quite afraid because I didn't understand a thing. After five years studying Fine Art, I saw the final degree projects and I didn't understand a thing. I'm someone who reads, watches films, I mean, I've never been one to spend all day in the bar. Well, I'd go sometimes, but nothing out of the ordinary. But there was a lot of distance between what the author wanted to say, what the artist wanted to say, and what got through to me. And that was very frustrating, and was why I went to the other extreme of visual storytelling, ie photojournalism, where you suppose what you have to say perhaps isn't so much yours, but it's a language everyone understands. In art what you have to say is me, me, me, and the language you use is almost only for you; and in the press what you have to do is forget about the "me", you have to be neutral, and the language you use is for everyone.

I took a path towards art: I'm interested in the language of art, not in its most exaggerated form, but I was interested in being the one talking. And I went to the press because I was very interested

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in everyone understanding me, and having an accessible language, and for the audience to be everyone, not just the critics or the experts. So, I've ended up somewhere in the middle. And now I'm too artistic to be in the press and too documentary to be in the art world; de Middel by name, and by nature...

**Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro**

Really though, it's a very productive place to be. Because you're somewhere you're forced to be thinking all the time, perhaps?

**Cristina de Middel**

I think we're living in a time when you have to keep thinking all the time. Because if you ease off, you end up with a snowball effect where you don't understand a thing. Really, everything happens so quickly! If you don't understand properly and aren't thinking about the reasons why – not just what's going on, but why things are happening – then you're a puppet. And a puppet's a long way away from whoever's pulling their strings, and has no choice. I think it's hugely important now to encourage people to question things. Rather than offering answers, people have to question things constantly. Because if we don't, civilization is in a nosedive.

In this sense, I'm very optimistic because I think the new generations are very well-educated and they're also, I think, quite fun. But on the other hand I'm very pessimistic about everything that has to be undone for us to get to a decent point of democracy, of civilization. We're entering an almost medieval age of obscurantism, where politics is based on emotions, not on reason, where everyone is trying to manipulate opinions using emotional arguments. Trying to move nations. I mean, all these big words

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that have done so much damage, instead of being practical. People are using words to confuse. So, I'm a bit worried about that.

*Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro*

Well, it's a lovely day for thinking, isn't it? To start thinking seriously.

*Cristina de Middel*

Indeed.

*Jordi  
Sánchez-Navarro*

That seems an excellent way to end an inaugural lecture – inviting reflection, and stressing above all the importance of taking time to think.

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## Video



<https://youtu.be/MYP2kJT8BGo>

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## Key ideas

“I studied Fine Art. There was a lot of distance between what the artist wanted to say, and what got through to me. That was why I went to the other extreme of visual storytelling, ie photojournalism.”

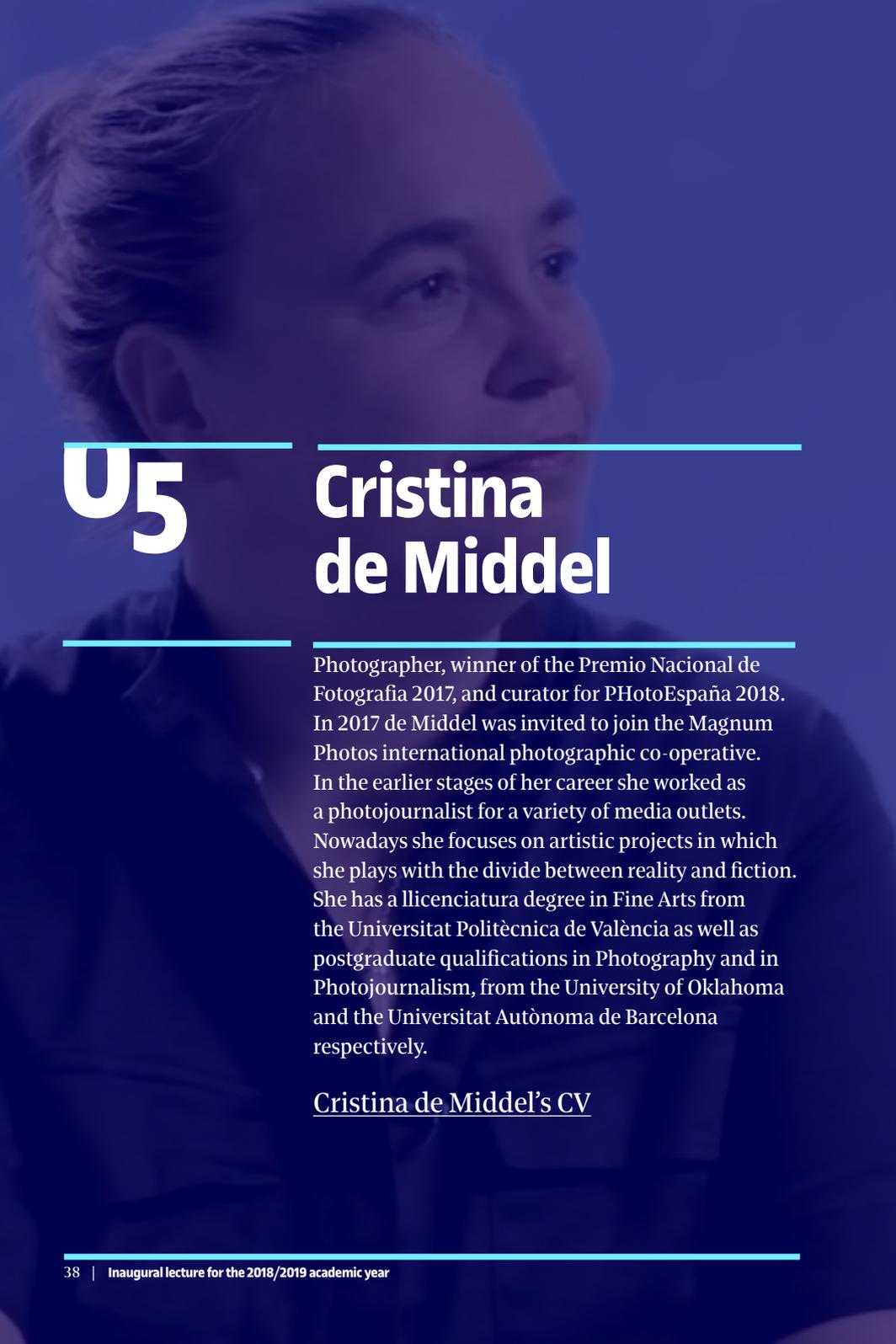
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“I’m interested in the language of art, in being the one talking. But I’m also very interested in everyone understanding me, and for the audience to be everyone, not just the critics or the experts. I’m too artistic to be in the press and too documentary to be in the art world.”

“I think we’re living in a time when you have to keep thinking all the time. If you don’t understand properly the reasons why things are happening, you’re a puppet.”



“I think it’s hugely important now to encourage people to question things, more than it is to offer answers.”

A portrait of Cristina de Middel, a woman with short, wavy hair, looking slightly to the right. The image is overlaid with a dark blue gradient and white text.

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## Cristina de Middel

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Photographer, winner of the Premio Nacional de Fotografía 2017, and curator for PHotoEspaña 2018. In 2017 de Middel was invited to join the Magnum Photos international photographic co-operative. In the earlier stages of her career she worked as a photojournalist for a variety of media outlets. Nowadays she focuses on artistic projects in which she plays with the divide between reality and fiction. She has a llicenciatura degree in Fine Arts from the Universitat Politècnica de València as well as postgraduate qualifications in Photography and in Photojournalism, from the University of Oklahoma and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona respectively.

### Cristina de Middel's CV

A portrait of Jordi Sánchez-Navarro, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a suit and tie. The image is overlaid with a blue gradient and white text.

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# U6

## Jordi Sánchez-Navarro

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Dean of the UOC's Faculty of Information and Communication Sciences and holder of a PhD in Audiovisual Communication from the Ramon Llull University (URL). He has been a teacher in the URL's Blanquerna Faculty of the Science of Communication, assistant director of the Sitges Film Festival, and director of the Barcelona International Comic Fair. Currently he combines his teaching work with responsibilities for coordinating the Sitges Film Festival's animation section.

[Jordi Sánchez-Navarro's UOC CV](#)

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## Recommendation for citations

DE MIDDEL, Cristina (2018). *The Image as a Form of Knowledge* [Interview with Cristina de Middel]. Inaugural lecture 2018-2019 [online]. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. [Accessed: day month year]. <http://w.uoc.edu/inaugural18/>

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