

Really Good Bad Photography

What constitutes a genuinely good photograph nowadays, when the equipment available to almost everyone makes it so easy to take one? Should you follow the rules—or break them all? David Evans takes a tour of the well-policed frontiers that separate amateur and professional photographers.



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RED-EYE

Red-eye usually arises when the camera flash reflects off the retina. It is generally assumed that red-eye is an error that can ruin a photograph, and helpful advice abounds in handbooks and online about how to avoid it. There is far less advice about how to encourage it, yet this was precisely what interested Paul Graham when he started photographing youth across Europe in the mid-nineties. The project was called *End of an Age*, published by Scalo in 1999.

The book includes an interview where Graham mentions his deliberate pursuit of what are generally considered technical errors—blur, colour casts, camera shake, bad flash technique, etc. And pride of place is given to red-eye, foregrounded in the photographic sequences that open and close the book. He lets on that he found a particular camera combination that generates red-eye, endowing his portraits with fiery, hungry qualities. He also loves the fact that red-eye is considered a mistake, and that camera manufacturers have introduced special buttons to eliminate it. Suggestively, he describes *End of an Age* as “anti-Photoshop”. He considers Photoshop’s filters for creating the flawless photograph as symptomatic of wide-ranging contemporary obsessions with an impossible perfection in everyday life. In contrast, he embraces imperfection. He loves flaws and wants to work with them for his own ends.



IMPERFECT BEAUTY

Imperfect Beauty was the title of a show that dealt with British fashion photography across the 1990s. It was curated by Charlotte Cotton, and opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2000. In the same year Taschen published *SUMO*, a comprehensive survey of the work of another fashion photographer from a different generation—Helmut Newton. The book weighs thirty kilos and comes complete with its own stand, designed by Philippe Starck. Heavy book. Heavy legacy. And in many ways, Cotton’s exhibition was an attempt to demonstrate that in the 1990s a veteran heavyweight had been successfully taken on by young featherweights.

The cover image of *SUMO* is from the famous series *Big Nudes* (1981). Significantly, it is this series that one confronts while ascending the red-carpet staircase of the Helmut Newton Foundation, Berlin.

Newton clearly regarded *Big Nudes* as almost a summation of his life’s work—full-frontal, monumental provocations that simultaneously evoke mythical Amazons, science-fiction fembots and the supermodels of contemporary fashion. In contrast, the cover of the catalogue for *Imperfect Beauty* shows a young, semi-nude Kate Moss photographed by Corinne Day by the seaside, published by *The Face* in 1990. The photographs from this shoot have a raw, improvised quality, and Day always insisted that she and Kate were just friends out for the day. Messing about. Having a laugh. Not entirely true, of course—Moss was already on the books of a modelling agency; Day herself had worked as a model; Phil Bickers, art director of *The Face*, provided advice and a stylist. Nevertheless, here was a refreshing antidote to Newton’s gravity.

Opposite page
Mariken Wessels
*Taking Off. Henry My
Neighbor*, 2015

This page
Mariken Wessels
*Rip Back Bended
Good*, 2015

THE WANDERING IMAGE

The Phaidon monograph on Wolfgang Tillmans includes a conversation with the painter Peter Halley, in which Tillmans recalls his first solo exhibition at Daniel Buchholz Gallery, Cologne, in 1993: “I found my signature in terms of showing my pictures in a non-hierarchical way. It was a very radical thing at the time, to show magazine pages alongside original photographs and to leave the photographs unframed; not to make a distinction in terms of value—you know, what belongs on the wall, what doesn’t. For me, the printed page had been a sort of unlimited multiple from the start.”

Reflections on the same exhibition also are the starting point for another conversation with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, published in 2007. Tillmans remembers his excitement about “the potential of the wandering image” and gives an example: “I had a display case containing four different magazines from four countries. In each magazine, the same photograph, taken by me, appeared—and with all the mistakes and peculiarities one often encounters, like having a color out of register. I thought it was great that one and the same image could cost a few marks in a magazine or book, but a few hundred pounds as a photo I had blown up and printed on my own.” In this case, magazines were brought into the Daniel Buchholz Gallery, but Tillmans has also been keen to do the reverse, and he notes that his first solo exhibition in a public museum (Portikus, Frankfurt, 1995) had as its catalogue an insert in *Spex*, an

independent magazine about pop culture published in Cologne. Tillmans stresses that he is not a commercial photographer crossing over to the art world. Rather, he is an artist who has always been involved with “this intentionally non-hierarchical parallelism of gallery spaces and print media”.

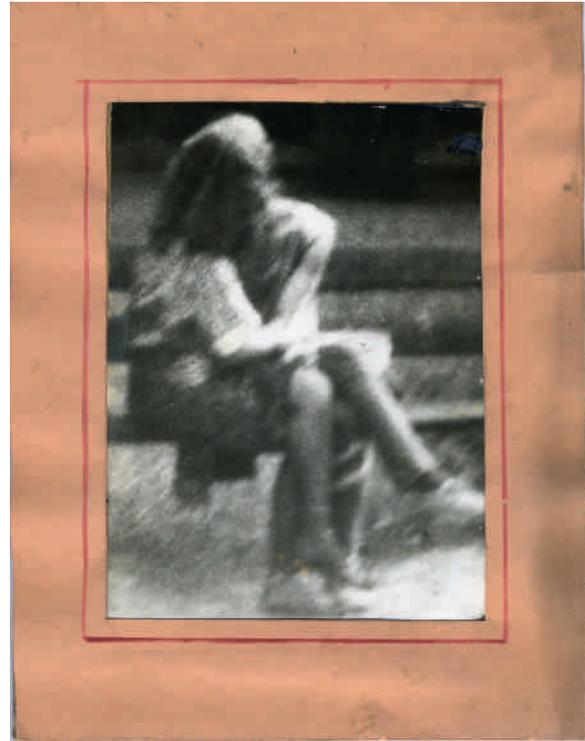
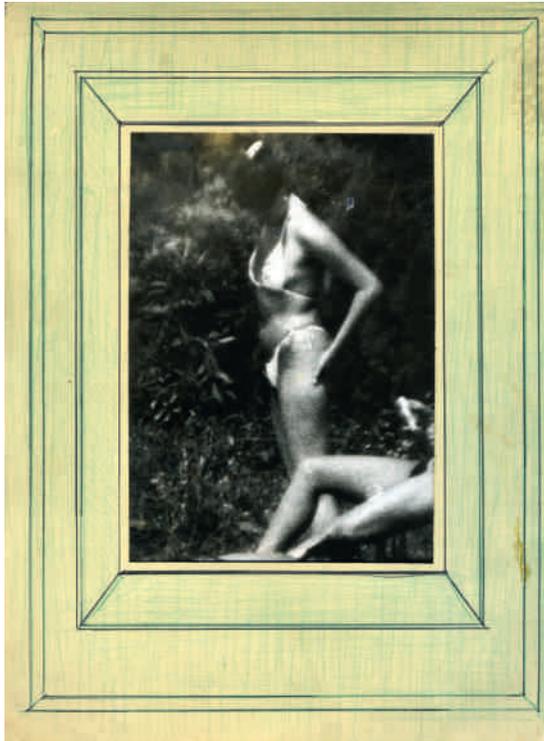
Attempts to characterize his installations have generated a bewildering number of comparisons, ranging from the image-adorned bedroom wall of the apocryphal teenager to the *Merzbau* of Kurt Schwitters. The comparisons are wide-ranging and have varying degrees of plausibility, yet they are all noticeably apolitical. In contrast, I prefer to relate Tillmans to a “swarm intelligence” celebrated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their democratic manifesto *Multitude* (2004).

For me, the “swarms” of Tillmans challenge these contemporary art photographers who seek the solemnity traditionally associated with the better-established medium of painting. The so-called “Düsseldorf School”, for instance, generally privileges a strictly hung exhibition of large, limited-edition prints, with the catalogue or monograph as mere supplement. Compared with Andreas Gursky or Candida Höfer, say, Tillmans comes across as light and playful, and in part he has established his reputation by developing modes of presentation and distribution that contrast sharply with the relatively sober working methods of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their former students.

Opposite page
Wolfgang Tillmans
Studio
29 April – 18 June 2016



COURTESY GALERIE BUCHHOLZ, BERLIN



COURTESY DELMES & ZANDER, COLOGNE

OUTSIDERS

The distinction between photographic perfection and imperfection is often formulated as a distinction between the professional and the amateur. The former is assumed to have a level of competence that justifies a payment of some sort. However, since the latter is motivated by love, and not money, then competence is a less pressing issue. For a professional's work to be described as amateurish would generally be considered a serious insult. For an amateur's work to be described as professional would usually be taken as compliment. Yet there are some who would reject such formulations, arguing that photography pursued for love, rather than a livelihood, can result in extraordinary work unconstrained by professional or social conventions.

Take Miroslav Tichý (1926–2011). From the 1960s to the mid-1980s he took photographs in his hometown of Kyjov (former Czechoslovakia), working with home-made equipment and specializing in surreptitious shots of local women.

Like a classic outsider artist, he operated in isolation and showed no interest in the so-called art world. Although he started exhibiting when he was in his seventies, international acclaim has been posthumous.

Or consider *Margret: Chronicle of an Affair—May 1969 to December 1970*. The “affair” involved a German businessman and his secretary, both married. The “chronicle” is mainly photographs, but also includes evocative items like empty pill packets, fingernail clippings and snippets of pubic hair. The documentation of this secret liaison was recently discovered in an abandoned briefcase in Germany. Consigned to Cologne gallerists Nicole Delmes and Susanne Zander, it now exists as a travelling exhibition and a book, published by Walther König in 2012.

And finally *Taking Off: Henry My Neighbor* by Mariken Wessels. Wessels lives and works in Amsterdam, often using found photographs. *Taking Off* exists as an exhibition but is better known as a book, published last year by Art Paper

Editions, Ghent, Belgium. The bulk of the book is around 5,500 nude photographs taken by Henry of his wife and muse Martha at their home on Long Island. Wessels never met Henry and Martha, but found out about them via former friends and neighbours when she was living close to New York City. Hence the subtitle, *Henry My Neighbor*. The main title, *Taking Off*, refers to the categories used by Henry to classify the nudes: bust / slacks; bust / slacks / bra; bust / squeezed; laying good; standing taking off; and so on. The main title also suggests the career of an artist being launched via this book.

The three examples are all very different, but could be loosely categorized as outsider art or art brut, effectively corroding the well-policed frontiers that separate amateur and professional photographers.

Opposite page
Miroslav Tichy
Untitled, undated
Mixed media on photography
on cardboard
(Left) 29.5 × 22 cm
(Right) 24.2 × 18.8 cm

This page
*Margret - Chronicle of an
Affair, Untitled*,
1970/08/21 – 1970/08/31
Vintage print
12.5 × 12 cm

