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Talking Books

Erik van der Weijde in Conversation with . . .

Mariken Wessels

Mariken Wessels is a Dutch artist and former actress. She is a master at creating detailed stories and characters by combining found footage, texts, and her own work in various media. Her books are mysterious gems that sometimes feel and read more like movies. I have the feeling that our shared passion for photobooks, found photography, and outsider art has roots in common ground: our studies at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam.

I had missed that because theater is a large ensemble work—something that I also like about it. I still visit theater shows almost every week.

In the Rietveld photography department, I was given the assignment to “make a book.” That was such an eye-opener for me. I enjoyed it so much! The sequence that comes with a book really appeals to me. And because of my training as an actress, I am familiar with delving into characters and developing scenarios. I also use this method in making books. There is enormous freedom in making a book, and yet it is also limited. I don’t just take photographs—I also make sets, scenes, or select photos from archives. And

live? What does she do? And why does she do certain things? When does it take place? After I have written these answers down, I have a framework in which there is enough freedom. Besides writing “the five Ws” I also draw, take pictures, and gather texts, books, and even clothing to complete my research material. Afterward, I only look, think, and make works from the character’s point of view. Finally, I test all credibility against what I have written, collected, et cetera. **EvdW** Wow, I am pretty impressed by this glimpse into your way of working. I am also curious as to when and where and how you started implementing found photography in your work. Was that already part of your process during your time at the Rietveld Academie?

MW The first book I made during my studies at the Rietveld consisted of found material from the Internet. I wanted to make a booklet in memory of my brother, who had just passed away. My brother was living in a special and secluded way. I actually had no images of him at all. Everything my brother had owned was taken by other family members, but I also wanted something tangible: a photo album. I then got the idea to work with found photos. I started writing in the way I explained above: Where and how did he live? What did that look like? What did he do? And why? Which music did he listen to? With the answers to these questions, and thus forming a scenario, I started browsing the Internet, where I found a way to dive into my brother’s “life.” Although the material is distant, the resulting work felt very close. And the strange thing is that, for example, if I now try to remember the entrance to his house, I see the photo that I took from the Internet. In fact, certain memories I had of him subsequently were built up from new images, which I really started to believe was true. So the question arises: How reliable are memories at all?

EvdW That is indeed an interesting question. Especially for photography, which deals with memory all the time. Personally, most of my memories from my early childhood come from our family albums, from a few single images. Our memories have limits and limitations, but what about the limitations of photobooks? Do you feel that the photobook as a form contains many limitations? Or do you specifically make use of them as a tool?

MW I actually like the fact that a book has limitations. As a result, I am challenged to break through expectations when I feel this is nec-

everything comes together in a project or book.

EvdW I have absolutely no background in acting whatsoever, but I guess that make-believe is an important factor. Being persuasive, for example. In your books, the stories can be very convincing, thus you who created these stories can be convincing. Do you have the feeling that, when you develop a book project, you dive deep into the subject matter? Like actors who live for a while as their character?

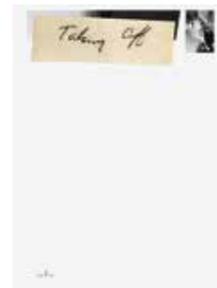
MW Is it really me who creates these stories? I see myself more as a collector, as someone who gathers material for a certain story, as someone forensically investigating. And yes, I do look at the material from a certain perspective, but I prefer not to mention what is “real” and what might not be true. A novelist can delve deep into the subject matter and create a story with the acquired knowledge and facts. Here, my training as an actress comes to the fore again. I start my projects with extensive research, trying to identify as much as possible with the story I want to tell. Of course, there are the facts, but there are also many loose ends. To make a complete story out of this information, I often apply a method that actors use to grow into their characters called “the five Ws”: Who, what, where, why, and where to? I always write this out. And so I ask myself questions like: Where does the character



Spread from: Mariken Wessels, Taking Off, Henry My Neighbor, 2015, n.p.

EvdW We both enjoyed our photography education at the Rietveld Academie, although during different periods. In what way did that formal education determine your approach to photography? You already had quite some training in acting and writing, right?

MW Indeed, before I went to the Rietveld Academie, I played in theaters and on TV. But before I went to drama school, I was already taking a lot of photographs. I even had my own darkroom in the bathroom. At the time, when I was living and working at the theater in Breda, I was—besides selling tickets and running the bar—also allowed to take photos during rehearsals of renowned theater companies. My love for theater started there. Later, I moved to Amsterdam, where I graduated from drama school. I also took acting classes at the Lee Strasberg Institute in New York. During the period when I worked as a professional actress, for example at Het Nationale Toneel, I always had my own side projects going on. Many of them had to do with photography. In addition to acting, I also wanted to make autonomous visual work. After years of working as an actress, I decided to enroll at the Rietveld Academie. There, everything fell into place for me. I noticed how important it was to make my own work.



Mariken Wessels: Taking Off. Henry My Neighbor.

Art Paper Editions, Gent 2015.
330 pages, 24 × 33 cm, numerous b/w and color illustrations.
€ 30.– / ISBN 978-9-490800345

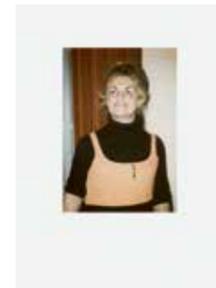
essary. For example, in *Taking Off: Henry My Neighbor* (2015) I show a new image behind the photo that has to be opened, and which in terms of form is an echo of the image above it. In *Queen Ann. P.S. Belly cut off* (2010) I included a sealed transparent envelope containing several photos. I assigned a specific place to the envelope when it was put in the printer, but, because it sits loosely, I know that the envelope can reappear in other places, which was my intention. Like memories, they can pop up at any given moment, just as this envelope that ended up somewhere in the book. The limitations of a book also challenge me to carefully consider the choices I have to make, like the choice of paper, cover, thickness, the behavior of the ink, dimensions, et cetera. All of these elements contribute to the whole. For me as an artist and a designer, such elements are crucial in telling a story.

EvdW When you work with a publisher who might also be a designer, do you still feel the need to control all of the aforementioned choices? And also, could you tell us something about why you moved from self-publishing to working with more established publishers?

MW I work with pages, photos, and collage, both on the wall and on tables where I can move everything around. At the same time, I also have the entire book in Adobe InDesign, because that’s where I develop its layout. When it is finished, I print everything and make a dummy, sometimes several dummies. Eventually, I will show this dummy to a publisher, with whom I then work on the finishing touches of the design. For *Taking Off*, the designer/publisher proposed several covers, which we discussed together. That works really well. But things like content, order, and size I already have in mind at a much earlier stage, and so I like to arrive with a dummy.

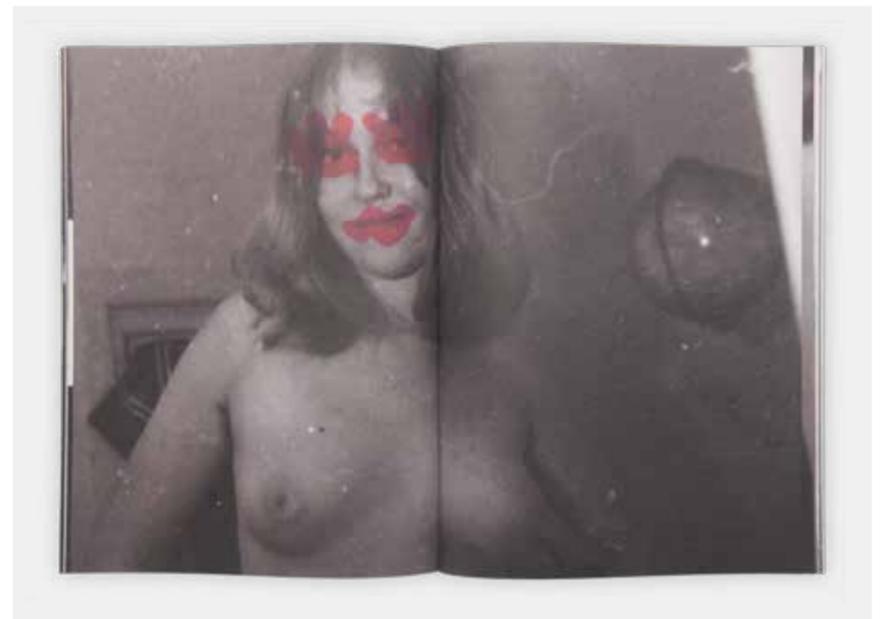
Hans Gremmen [of Fw:Books] and I will be collaborating on a book about my current project *Arising from the Ground*. This means a completely different way of working for me. Hans will get the visual material and will start working with it. Everything is still open, so Hans is free to play with it. I find this a challenge, and I think that for this new project—which is different from my artist’s books—this approach can work well. A certain distance could add something to this work. I did enjoy self-publishing my first books, but it is also time-consuming. Selling books is hard work! Now I prefer to invest my time and energy in creating new work.

EvdW *Taking Off* not only thematizes the body, but is much more of an obsession, right? The endless repetition, until something fundamental breaks, but even after that it continues in a slightly transformed way. I believe that photography and obsession are a perfect fit: the click-



Mariken Wessels: Queen Ann. P.S. Belly cut off.

Alauda Publications, Amsterdam 2010.
80 pages, 24 × 33 cm, numerous b/w and color illustrations.
€ 35.– / ISBN 978-90-815314-1-2



Spread from: Mariken Wessels, Elisabeth – I Want to Eat, 2008, n.p.

ing, the repetition, the making of a similar image . . . How do you feel about (artistic) obsessions? And how about outsider art and photography? Do you find inspiration there?

MW *Taking Off* indeed deals with obsession. Henry photographs his wife endlessly, and he archives very precisely what he has photographed. The obsession remains even after his wife has left him and Henry can no longer take photographs. His obsession shifts from photography to making cutouts, and then to making clay figurines after those collages. Being obsessed with something—anything—gives him a hold on life. That is why he was always looking for something to completely surrender to. Holding on to one thing might bring peace of mind, I believe, but it might also bring restlessness, if it doesn’t stop. Perhaps this unrest, for Henry at least, is less severe than being completely “loose” and having endless possibilities? Photography certainly also has an obsessive side. You can dive into it completely. Only after a project has been completed, the obsession might fade, until another project comes along. Maybe I speak more for myself than for other artists. Henry was obsessively photographing Martha, ultimately counting more than five thousand shots, and I was obsessively working with Henry’s life. So who is the obsessive one? I am certainly inspired by outsider art. While it is often obsessive, it also feels incredibly free, honest, and raw. I really like such freedom in any work. The work by Miroslav Tichý or Gerard Fieret, to name the more famous ones, has inspired me.

EvdW Yes, I also find those names incredibly inspiring. Both Tichý and Fieret were quite obsessed with women, a recurring subject in your work as well. But in your books the emphasis is much more on the body. I even said jokingly to you before that I’d had to address all of those breasts in your books. So, why the breasts?

MW In *Taking Off*, it is Henry who is obsessed with breasts. I am definitely concerned with the breasts, but more specifically with how they are shown. Because this says so much more about the character capturing all of this, cutting them into collages and subsequently translating those into clay figurines.

In *Elisabeth – I Want to Eat* (2008), the breasts tell more about the mental state of the protago-

nist. For me, showing breasts has something vulnerable, which I find beautiful. The fact that I provide space in my work to show this has to do with my intrinsic interest in people, which of course includes the body. The naked body plays the lead in my forthcoming project, *Arising from the Ground*. Very heavy bodies, subject to gravity above water and displaying, in turn, a totally different behavior underwater. The body as landscape and as alienation—that’s what the photos in this project are about.

The life-size ceramic sculptures, which are part of the project, are inspired by Eadweard Muybridge’s photogravure “Arising from the Ground” (plate 286 from 1885) from his extended series “Human and Animal Locomotion.” This plate depicts the struggle of an obese woman standing up from a lying position.

EvdW That sounds intriguing. When can we expect this new book?

MW The book is scheduled to be published on the occasion of my solo show at The Ravestijn Gallery in Amsterdam in March and April 2020.

Mariken Wessels is a visual artist living and working in Amsterdam (NL). She makes artist’s books, sculptures, installations, photos, collages, and video works.

Erik van der Weijde (b. 1977) is a Dutch artist whose work consists of (self-)published books and photographic series. Currently, he is also teaching at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam (NL).



Mariken Wessels: Elisabeth – I Want to Eat.

Alauda Publications, Amsterdam 2008.
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