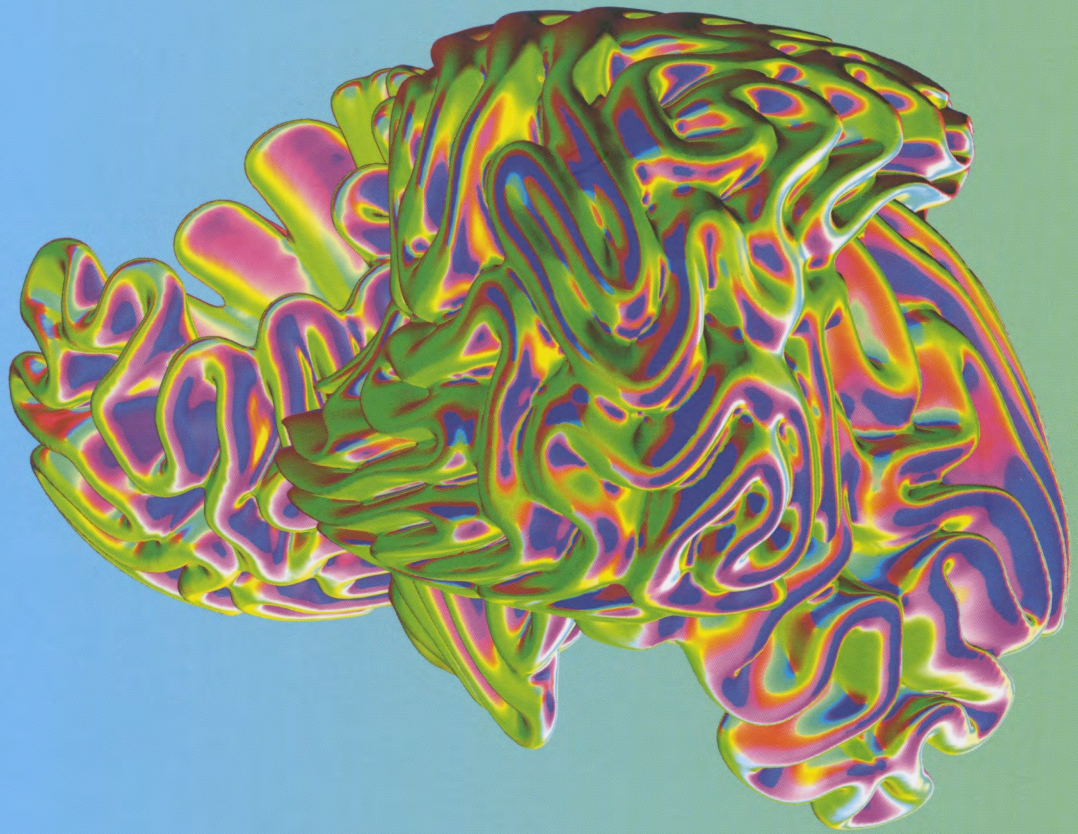
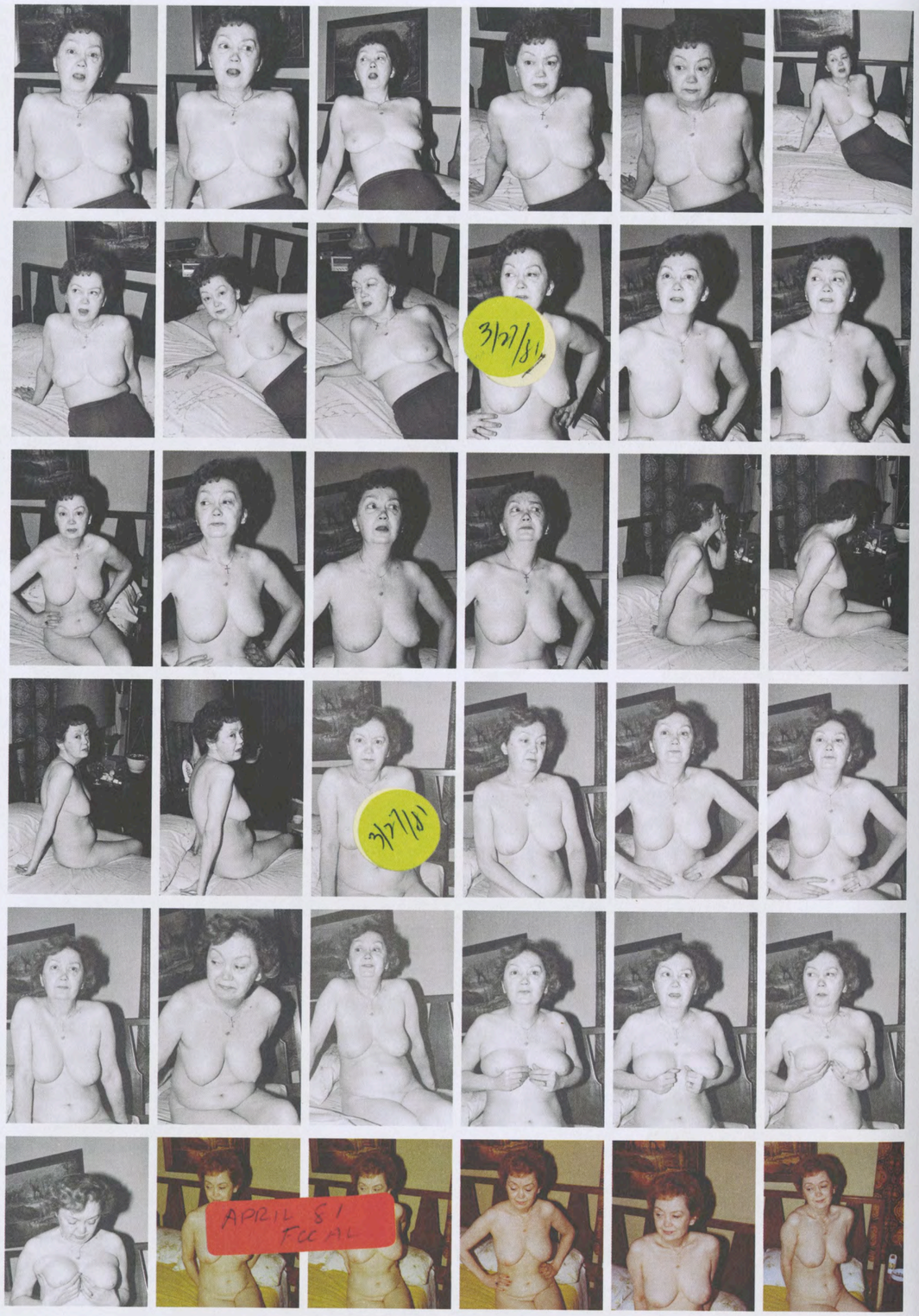
Mind



Ladybeard

Taking Off. Henry My Neighbor

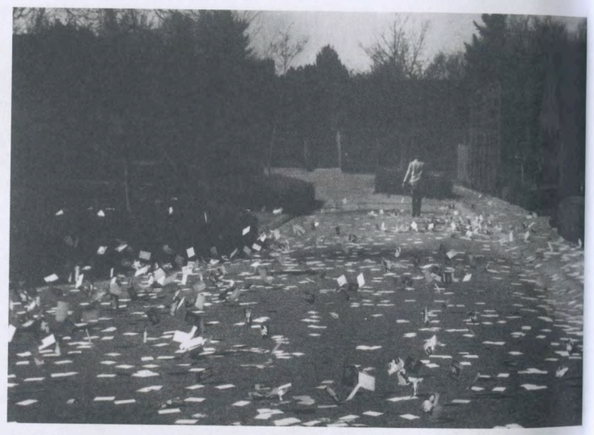
Mariken Wessels



When Mariken Wessels learned that her former neighbours had mysteriously disappeared, she decided to find out the truth about their sudden departure. *Taking Off.* reconstructs the story of Henry, the electrician next door, and his obsession with Martha, his wife turned muse. Mariken discovered that Henry had obsessively photographed Martha over two years, either naked or undressing, producing a staggering total of 5,500 images. He coated the walls of a private room – to which Martha was denied access – with these strangely banal nudes, and kept a chart documenting which poses he had photographed when and in what style: "Bust/Squeezed" in "Feb.1981", or "Standing taking off" in "color".

After nearly two decades of marriage and two years of modelling, suddenly Martha had had enough. Upon discovering what went on in Henry's private room, she tore down the images of herself and threw his life's work out the window. Myriad photographs lined the road, caught in people's hedges or fluttering in the wind, while the real Martha disappeared from sight.

Heartbroken and muse-less, Henry made collages with the scraps that remained. Martha's breasts were now multiplied, her legs splayed further apart. Years later, these distorted collages served as models for the peculiar clay figurines which Henry dotted around his new residence, a cabin in the woods. They nestled into cupboards, his dilapidated montages peppering the walls. When he had eventually exhausted all possible permutations of his material, Henry retreated even deeper into the woods. No one has heard a peep from him since.

Mariken Wessels's book presents us with a fascinating and disturbing archive of one man's unending obsession. Displayed over and over again across 332 giddy pages, Martha's form is made hypnotic; we involuntarily come to know every curve, crevice, and angle of her body. But while we admire Martha's escape from the confines of her lover's gaze, we are also left to pity the forlorn Henry, ourselves taking the place of the abandoned voyeur. Henry's work cost him his muse – *Taking Off* reminds us to be cautious with our desire, but also with our inspiration.

All images courtesy of Mariken Wessels