Anna Daučíková
Adam Szymczyk
Keizo Kitajima
Duncan Forbes
Gabriele Stötzer
Franziska Schmidt
Katia Kameli
Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
Eiko Grimberg
Volker Weiß
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 a various media. Her books are mysterious gems that sometimes feel like real movies. I have the feeling that our shared passion for photography, 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 will miss 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 actor, I am familiar with delving into characters and developing scenarios. I also use this method for making books. There is room for 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 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: It is 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 has been very helpful to me. In my books, I like to explore and play around with different visual and conceptual breaks, but even after that it continues in a slightly transformed way. I believe that photography and obsession are a perfect fit: the click, 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?

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 the table 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 it in laying out. When it is finished, I print everything and make a dummy, sometimes several dummies. Eventually, I will show this dummy to the publisher. 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 the way I have to balance it is much easier. So, I like to arrive with a dummy. Hans Gremmelen [PvW Books] and I will be collaborating on a book about my current project Arising from the Ground. This means a completely different approach for me. In fact, of course, there are a few subsequences that were built up from new images, which I really start to believe was true. I never question the images anymore. How reliable are the memories used in books?

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

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 necessary.

EvdW: I am sure you’re 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 has been very helpful to me. In my books, I like to explore and play around with different visual and conceptual breaks, but even after that it continues in a slightly transformed way. I believe that photography and obsession are a perfect fit: the click, 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: EvdW indeed deals with obsession. Henry photographs his wife endlessly, and he always something he has photographed. The obsession remains even after he has heacked 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 on hold. That is why he was always looking for something to completely surrender to. Holding on to one thing might bring peace of mind. Believe, it might bring something with it. It doesn’t stop. Perhaps this answer for Henry at least, is less severe than being completely “hoose” and having endless possibilities? Photography certainly also has an obsessive side. You can dive into it completely. Only after a project has been completely, the obsession might fade, until another project comes along. Maybe I speak more for myself than for other artists. Henry was obsessively photographing Murtha, ultimately counting more than five thousand shots, and I was obsessively working with Henry’s life. So who is the obsessive? I am certainly inspired by outsider art. While it is obsessively, it also feels incredibly free, honest, and raw. I really like such freedom in any work. The work by Minus Tichy and Gerard Fairie, to name the more famous ones, has impressed me. EvdW: Yes, I also find those names incredibly inspiring. Both Tichy and Fairie were quite obsessed with women, a recurring subject in your work as well. But in my books, the characters are imagined in much more on the body. I even said jokingly to you before that I had to address all of those breasts in my 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.

EvdW: I was curious about your current project. Arising from the Ground (plate 286 from 1885) from his exiled series “Human and Animal Locomotion.” This plate depicts the struggle of an obese woman standing up from a lying position. The life-size ceramic sculptures, which are part of the project, are inspired by Edward Maybridge’s photographe “Arising from the Ground” (plate 286 from 1885) from his exiled series “Human and Animal Locomotion.” This plate depicts the struggle of an obese woman standing up from a lying position.

MW: I am pretty impressed by this glimpse into your way of working. I am also curious and how you started implementing found photography in your work. Was that already part of your process during your time at the Rietveld Academie?

EvdW: I actually like the fact that a book has limited. For me as an artist and a designer, such elements are crucial in telling a story. Everything is still open, so Hans is free to play with it. And can find this unrest, for Henry at least, is less severe than being completely “hoose” and having endless possibilities? Photography certainly also has an obsessive side. You can dive into it completely. Only after a project has been complete, the obsession might fade, until another project comes along. Maybe I speak more for myself than for other artists. Henry was obsessively photographing Murtha, ultimately counting more than five thousand shots, and I was obsessively working with Henry’s life. So who is the obsessive? I am certainly inspired by outsider art. While it is obsessively, it also feels incredibly free, honest, and raw. I really like such freedom in any work. The work by Minus Tichy and Gerard Fairie, to name the more famous ones, has impressed me. EvdW: Yes, I also find those names incredibly inspiring. Both Tichy and Fairie were quite obsessed with women, a recurring subject in your work as well. But in my books, the characters are imagined in much more on the body. I even said jokingly to you before that I had to address all of those breasts in my 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.