



# MARTIN PARR'S BEST BOOKS OF THE DECADE

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**Photobooks: Martin Parr's Best Books of the Decade**  
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# Photolreland Festival

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# **MARTIN PARR'S BEST BOOKS OF THE DECADE**

**A personal selection**

Edited by Moritz Neumüller and Ángel Luis González

Introduction

In early summer of 1999, when Martin Parr visited the exhibition Fotografía Pública: Photography in Print 1919—1939, in the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, he was left breathless. In a time when photography struggled to prove its art status by ever-larger Diasec prints and rigid mounting, here was a show of loose pamphlets, worn out magazines and yellowed photography books. He bought the catalogue, edited by the curator of the exhibition, Horacio Fernández, which was a beautiful photobook in itself, and showed it to his friends and colleagues back home, as he remembers: “Many people also saw this, and it became very cult, with people talking about it, so the impact was enormous”. Two years later, Andrew Roth’s *Book of 101 Books* presented a list of seminal photographic books of the twentieth century. At this time Martin Parr and Gerry Badger were already working on their two volumes of *The Photobook – A History*. At the same time as this revision of the history of photography in the printed matter, there was also a shift in the technological development. Digital printing became a serious competitor for the traditional offset process, and allowed to produce short printing runs in a satisfactory quality. Online print-on-demand platforms have since undoubtedly revolutionized the concept of self-publishing.

We decided to celebrate what we could call ‘The Decade of the Photobook’, with a selection of representative works, hand-picked by one of the greatest photographic bibliophiles on the planet; a small but ambitious project, dedicated to the promotion of a medium that for many photographers has become the most significant method to show their work and creative vision. Apart from being small, the project is utterly personal. It is a subjective list of works, a random number in chronological order, and based on the personal criteria of a book-lover. Each book is briefly introduced by Martin Parr, before giving the word to the authors themselves. In some cases, it was the publishers or a befriended curator who wrote the texts, but mostly they are unpublished, personal statements of the artists on the hows and whys of their projects. Something you cannot find neither in the books themselves, nor outside of them. Finally, many of the books treat on very personal matters, like family relations, intimate memories, and a look at one’s own identity. These works obviously play with the photobook’s close relationship to the family album. However, there are also publications that reflect the will to disseminate a personal point of view on a theme of public interest, such as war, state surveillance and terrorism.

Two thirds of the books on Martin’s list were published in the second half of the decade, despite the “book-drought”, right in the middle of the decade: For some reason, the year 2006 does not appear at all in Martin’s list, which is strange because the preceding and following years are especially productive, in this sense. Maybe this just shows how absurd it is to try to measure creativity in any way. However, rankings and charts are nothing new to the art business, and in fact, the success of a book project is mostly determined by sales. Thus, the book market of a country is not defined by the publishers and authors, but by the buyers. The USA is a traditionally strong market, whereas Spain, for example, is not. France seems to be the exception to the rule. While the Off Print event, which was organized in parallel to Paris Photo 2010 has been an enormous success, and the Parisian fair itself traditionally boasts with a large magazine and book stand section, no French publisher has made it on to our list. Has Martin fallen for an old prejudice against England’s favourite rival? Not necessarily: When checking back with the publishers list promulgated in this spring’s European Photography Magazine, we see the same situation. Only Actes Sud has made it in

that listing, which is based “on a global survey” done in the fall of 2010. The question raised in the short article beside it, “Thanks to digital printing and online services, design, production and distribution have long-since been ‘democratized’ – but is this really true?”, is neither answered by their list, nor ours. In fact, only a handful of the books in *Martin Parr’s Best Books of the Decade* are self-published. Maybe the democratization is still too young, and the quality of the end product is largely defined by the professionals in the publishing houses, however small they might be. Or maybe because we just have not found the right books: The main problem of photobooks, as with traditional artists’ books, is distribution. Most bookshops do not carry print-on-demand books. Initiatives such as the Artists’ Books Cooperative might well solve the problem: This distribution network created by and for artists who make print-on-demand artists’ books helps getting books to the people who are interested in them. But back to our list and its song-contest-like rating of countries. Even if Martin himself states that “the Dutch continue to be the best bookmakers in Europe”, most of the books on his list were actually published in Germany (Douze Points!). The Netherlands have to share their third place

Moritz Neumüller & Ángel Luis González





**Ryan McGinley**, *The Kids Are Alright*  
Self published, New York, 2000  
20 x 13.4 cm  
32 pages

McGinley almost singlehandedly revitalised American photography in a way Nan Goldin had fifteen years earlier; with images of his friends having a wild and wonderful time. This edition of 100 was a shining beacon of how a small self-published book can announce the arrival of a major new talent.





From time to time a new photographer arrives on the scene that is difficult to classify, and Kawauchi is one such photographer. Her images are so fresh, so simple and truly original, it almost defies belief. *Utatane* translates to mean 'Siesta', which lends itself perfectly to the dream-like quality of these images. This book has been reprinted many times and she is now known and appreciated internationally.

**Rinko Kawauchi, *Utatane***  
 Little More, Tokyo, 2001  
 29 x 24 cm  
 132 pages





**Christien Meindertsma**  
*Checked Baggage*  
 Soeps Uitgeverij  
 Eindhoven, 2004  
 15 x 21 cm  
 322 pages

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This book documents the 3,264 objects that Meindertsma had bought at auction for 500 Euros. These were all objects confiscated at Schipol airport, during the more stringent security checks initiated after 9/11. The book, in an edition of roughly 1,000, included one of the featured objects with the book when they were sold.



This small edition of images grabbed from Google Street View is a wonderful and poignant book. By trawling through the back streets of America – and usually including pedestrians with their faces blurred by Google – we see how this new twist to street shooting, done from the armchair, takes the genre into new territories.

**Doug Rickard**  
*A New American Picture*  
White Press, Köln, 2010  
22 x 33 cm  
92 pages







**Florian van Roekel**  
*How Terry Likes His Coffee*  
Self-published, Amsterdam, 2010  
20.6 cm x 30.6 cm  
80 pages

The Dutch continue to be the best bookmakers in Europe, and in particular ex-students making small book print runs as part of their degree courses. This book explores life in a contemporary office, and captures perfectly the tedium of the work place.





**Michael Wolf**, *Tokyo Compression*  
 peperoni books, Berlin, 2010  
 25.2 x 21.2 cm  
 112 pages

The Tokyo metro has for many years been a productive shooting place for photographers – especially showing the huge numbers squeezing onto the overcrowded trains. This close up, almost forensic take on this idea, together with a strong design makes a captivating book.



## Authors' Notes



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I made this book for a DIY (do it yourself) show at 420 West Broadway. It was a historic art building that Castelli was in and also Sonabend throughout the years. All the galleries had moved on to Chelsea by 2000. I was making handmade books of my photos for my friends around that time of pictures I was taking of them. Jack Walls told me that I had a good eye and suggested that I have a show on the ground floor before they renovated it to become a DKNY store. I wasn't studying photography in school so I snuck into the Parsons darkroom and made a lot of poster-sized prints. The gallery space was huge so I had to make about 100 prints to fill it.

Since I was studying graphic design at school I was very knowledgeable about desktop publishing. I had one of the first negative scanners and also a really good printer. I made 100 handmade books for the opening. All hand bound. I used an image of my dad on the cover after he had gotten into a fight and had a black eye from a fist fight. I told him to give me the peace sign. It was taken in my house in New Jersey that hasn't changed in 40 years. He's standing in front of this 60s wallpaper that covers most of my house.

Inside is pictures of me and my friends having adventures in downtown NYC. I was just learning to be a photographer. It's about a year's worth of photographs that I had taken in people's bedrooms, subway tunnels, rooftops, downtown, and bathrooms. Documenting my experiences downtown on drugs, I consider it a contribution to that style of photography in those circumstances: Being downtown, an artist, and out every night high on drugs.

I always had my Yashica T4 camera with me and would carry about 20 rolls of film in my pockets at all times. I loved shooting that camera without the flash because of its Carl Zeiss lens with such a low aperture. I captured light in such a beautiful way and was very easy to use.

I gave away and sold about 50 books at the opening. The rest I sent to magazines I liked and artists I admired.

**Ryan McGinley**



**From an Interview of  
Rinko Kawauchi by  
Masakazu Takei in 2006**

**Your first publications were the trilogy of photo books *Utatane*, *Hanabi* and *Hanako*. As a freelance shooting commercial work, when did you find the time to work on personal projects such as *Utatane*?**

Well, sometimes I would work on my personal projects during the spare time I had between each job. At other times, I would shoot what caught my eye while working on an advertising project. I always carried a camera with me just in case.

**How do photography books differ from exhibitions?**

The biggest difference is that a photography book can be held in your hands. It can thus be appreciated on a more intimate level. Exhibitions are seen in white boxes. When you are putting together a photography book, you must keep in mind that you look at them in a sequential way as you turn the pages. When viewing an exhibition, what counts most is the space and how it is structured. These are two very different ways of looking at photographs.

**Do you enjoy reading?**

I like books. Even if I don't understand the content, I am happy just having them. I love libraries. Since there were not many books in my school library, I often went to the municipal library in Tsurumi Ward (Osaka) by bicycle. I like being by myself in the library.

**It is very difficult for young artists abroad to publish their books before they exhibit their works, while in Japan young artists can publish their work relatively easily. What do you think of this difference in opportunities?**

It has been my first goal to publish books. It has been more important to me than making an exhibition. Even when I knew my work would not be published, I did not consider it completed until I was finished organizing it into portfolios. Before I published my first book, I was making my own handmade books every half a year or so. It was very important for me to unify my works into a series before moving on to the next stage. For me an exhibition is a reward, not a goal in itself. I think that if I was not able to publish my work, I would continue making books on my own. It is more important to me to show my works in the form of a book than to show the print itself.

**You simultaneously released three photography books in Japan. Did your situation change following the release of these publications?**

It completely changed my life. It means that I am now appreciated as an artist. You are not recognized as an artist in Japan unless you have published something. People place more importance on your publications than on your exhibitions. For the selection of the Annual Kimura Ihei Award, what they consider is the publications.

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During the tearful days after I had been overwhelmed by a sense of loss and sorrow following the unexpected death of my mother, I happened to open her wardrobe and find a huge quantity of underwear. These garments, which no one would wear again but which seemed to be waiting for someone to put them on, looked to me like my mother's skin, so I decided to photograph them. I thought that by taking pictures of them, I could bring myself to throw away the worn-out underwear and other things that had belonged to my mother.

These photographs, which I began taking without any intention of showing, came to be published after Ota Michitaka, the head of the Sokyusha company, suggested we make a book out of them. But as these were pictures of my mother's personal items, the book did not seem right for a large audience. Instead, I thought they would be good as a quiet, casual record of my memories.

I thought about creating a book that would fit inside a small hand, but the designer wanted to make something with a large format. As my mother was a bashful person with a humble character, I persuaded him to compromise somewhat, and we arrived at the present size.

It took me approximately four months to arrive at this sequence of photographs. On the day that my late mother's ashes were returned to me, I started Mother's by shooting a photograph of her as a young 23-year-old woman, whom I had never met, set up on the table. The content gradually traced the life and death of one woman.

And with the passage of time, my personal mother, who had belonged to no one but me, travelled all over the world to become everyone's mother.

**Miyako Ishiuchi**



Fiction is Unbearable!

This book is living proof that photography, or more precisely, art, can be a survival tool, regardless of whether one is a photographer or not, as was my case in 1994, when I thought of myself more as an actress. I began then an experiment in role-playing photographing my stepmothers with an automatic camera and then expanding out into their circles of friends. By 2002 I had compiled a selection of photos and published it under the title *Ricas y Famosas*. Born and bred in Mexico City amidst disposable, themed, high class habitats, I found myself pondering the nature of artificiality. I wondered: what is false here? What is hidden in a reality that is all for show? Why do I feel haunted by my own images?

Initially, I chose to photograph women acting like women to see if I could capture and question the acrobatic skill of conforming to someone else's notion of what one represents while perhaps believing that there really is such a thing as femaleness to enact. As I delved further into what often seemed like photographic cartoon land, I felt impotent and aphasic in regards to the many layers of ominous contradictions that did not stop at the level of a scandalous and rapidly growing national economic disparity between rich and poor. Curiously, what I most frequently was asked about was my ability to persuade people into being photographed, yet I had to convince no one.

I'd like to credit two grand causes of inspiration: Diego Velazquez's paintings and Freudian theory. Both provided great

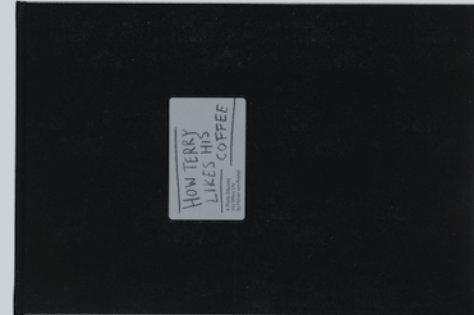
entertainment as well as specific sources of material, including popular distortions that oversexualized Freud's theories or that alluded to dingy architectonic notions of interior depth. My imagination was also stimulated by a number of Freudian scenarios which purport to describe – and also serve to suggest like a libretto – the point of view of a male spectator, along with, of course, the vicissitudes of female subjectivity such as narcissism, masochism, passivity, paranoia, hysteria, and castration anxiety.

My work is also informed by how, as it seemed to me while growing up in Mexico, women continue to be slapped in the face with the pre-established terms of perpetual visibility and with a slavish relationship to and as private property. At the same time, women are assigned a certain naiveté in relation to systems of signification. I observed, for instance, everywhere complicity towards a disembodied eroticism that was left unquestioned and that encouraged females to imitate the aesthetics of women who are paid to fake their pleasure.

In this project I collaborated with other women and men in exploring the plasticity of the aforementioned and many other stereotypes, categories and myths, including the one that informs a priori about what an "interiors photographer" is looking for when she comes into a home with a model release. Photography thus has helped me not only to see but to see through these issues and ultimately understand how it is alarmingly seductive to participate in one's own oppression.

**Daniela Rossell**

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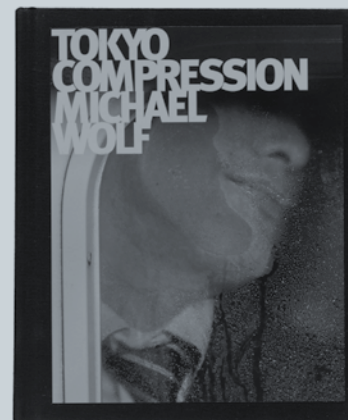
Terry didn't understand why I named the book after him, or why I even bothered to make a book about offices. They are so ordinary. I wanted to tell him that his name and his office represent something else, something larger. How they became metaphors, referring to an invisible world where everything makes sense in a way that dreams make sense. Or how I felt the office was trying to tell me something, but if I thought too hard trying to force it out, the message would drift away from me. How the book is really about struggling to feel connected to daily reality. That it's about me personally, but also about society itself losing its touch with their surroundings. But I didn't tell him this.

Instead I gave him a different answer. That I myself worked at an office for ten months as a social worker intern, which I still had to come to terms with. Or sometimes I tell people that office life and working people in general intrigue me because I have been struggling with choosing a profession ever since I turned sixteen. I used to convince myself that my profession had just not been invented yet. Like at some point there were no CGI artists, day traders or IT procurement officers, like the man in my book with the creased sweater, frozen behind the copying machine like a Tussauds statue. In truth I do not quite understand why I started going to the office a few times a week for fourteen months. It just felt like

the right thing to do. I could only shoot about three or four different settings a day, because of the time involved in setting up lighting and waiting for something to happen, not knowing what exactly. At times it seemed more like fishing. Only two or three meters away from my subjects, breathing quietly as to not to disturb their natural behaviour as much as possible.

I really enjoy working this way. A few years ago I experimented with staging pictures, but I noticed that a picture emanating from my rational thoughts was not able to evoke personal meaning. The conversation with the image would feel more like a lecture than a dialogue. In a way I believe that this story is the story told by the offices themselves, and not so much by me. I just channel a message. Maybe I was right not to tell Terry this, it sounds irrational.

**Florian van Roekel**



All the images in Tokyo Compression were photographed over a time period of 30 working days. I took 6 trips: each one lasting 5 days, Monday to Friday. All images are photographed at one train station in Tokyo, from 7:30–8:45am each morning. Every 80 seconds, another train would roll into the station filled with morning commuters on their way to work.

**Michael Wolf**

### **Acknowledgements**

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