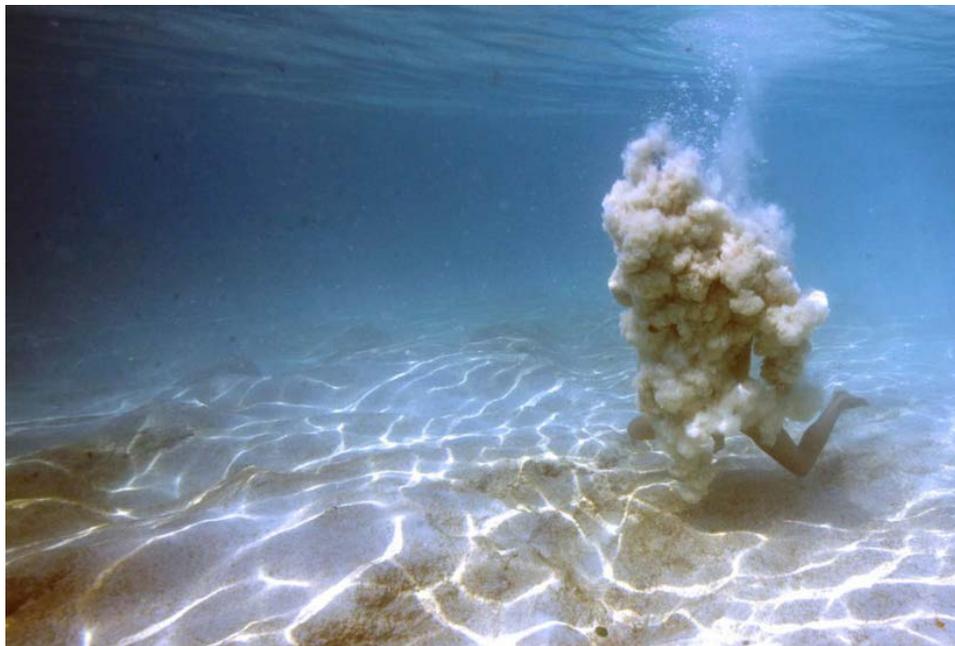


CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY: AN INFORMAL MOVEMENT

Sam Milbrath



James Cooper, Image from: tinyvices.com/gallery/james-cooper

All forms of art evolve over time in relation to society. What was once avant-garde photographic aesthetics are now symbolic of a past society's values. Images containing socially 'correct' aesthetics, such as perfect exposure and centered in-focus subjects are now definitive of a past artistic generation. Today, photographs that a vast majority would have discarded because of 'incorrect' aesthetics are now highly celebrated by popular culture.

What aesthetics are generally associated with 'wrong' photographs? Compared to Fine Art photography, images with blurred focus, off-center composition, shifting light, imbalanced exposures, and subject issues such as odd facial expressions and entirely cropped features, contain these 'wrong' aesthetics. As well, the informal frontal flash of a point-and-shoot camera and drugstore over-saturated processing are classic indications of amateur photographic production. Ironically, as popular culture evolves parallel to contemporary photography, these 'incorrect' aesthetics have slowly become correct.

These new tendencies in photography are welcomed because of the natural, constant evolution of society and art together. More specifically, there is a current attitude projected in youth and popular culture that is easy-going and anti-formalist. Youth's relaxed social approach is then realized in the informal art produced. Although older generations display these 'incorrect' aesthetics in photography, the associated attitude emanates from a youthful generation. The natural tendency to rebel against past, formalist generations is partly responsible. However, changes in contemporary youth culture, such as photography apps that easily manipulate images, heavily encourages informal, snapshot photography.

In the contemporary photography book SHOOT – Photography of the Moment, Ken Miller coins the term 'wrong' photography in his essay called the moment. Miller argues that the trend away from choosing a photograph with the 'correct' aesthetics is the photography of the moment. The seemingly simple amateur snapshot has willingly transformed from a modest personal collection of memories to an influential artifact celebrated in fine art galleries, museums, and more recently, online blogs worldwide.

Wolfgang Tillmans, one of the most celebrated commercial photographers of the past several decades, engages with the mysterious intensity of 'wrong' aesthetics. Classic amateur qualities such as blur and exposure issues appear in much of Tillmans' work. This inclusion adds an aesthetic appeal of blurred colour and overexposed light to seemingly straightforward captured moments. The use of blur in his photographs arguably undermines the medium and transforms the image into a contemporary impressionist painting.



Wolfgang Tillmans, Alex & Lutz Back, Image from Christies

Similarly, contemporary photographer Linus Bill deliberately shoots and exhibits images that reinforce his informal, raw approach. "Errors are very welcome, and I constantly help them to appear in my work," Bill stated in an interview for SHOOT – Photography of the Moment. Bill's quick and unassuming snapshots of family and friends portray the true nature of each subject.

By incorporating 'incorrect' aesthetics, such as masking the subject's face or cropping body parts out of the field-of-view, the image becomes more realistic and accessible. Bill's candid approach allows his viewers to be a part of each photograph and, by extension, allows a temporary view into that intimate, personal moment.



Linus Bill, Ohne Titel, 2005, Image from soiree-shot.com

Examples of contemporary photographers that explore the idea of 'wrongness' in practice are endless. Often, the use of informal aesthetics makes the art more accessible on an intimate level. This allows more viewers to connect with the artwork and makes the piece more memorable. For instance, Swedish photographer Agnes Thor softens each personal moment captured with muted tones and blurred surroundings.



Agnes Thor, Untitled, Image from Artist website: www.agneskarin.se

While in contrast, Michael Schmelling shoots a pair of disembodied, blurred legs perched on a dashboard with a harsh frontal flash and over-saturated development. Both approaches make the viewer feel involved in the moment.



Michael Schmelling, Toes & Map, Image from Artist website: www.michaelschmelling.com

In conclusion, this new generation of photographers is endless because of the growing demand for socially accessible art. And although examples of informal photographers are not generation specific, much of this approachability emanates from popular youth culture. It is the youthful, easy-going and anti-formalist attitude in popular culture that is projected into informal art expression. Its 'incorrect' aesthetics, similar to family snapshots, lend a familiarity that connects the viewer with the intimate moment captured. The approachability of 'incorrect' photography in turn helps to disintegrate past borders placed between fine art photographers and popular culture.

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