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Why it does not have to be in focus: Modern photography explained

by Jackie Higgins

London: Thames and Hudson, 2013, 224 pages

ISBN: 978-0500290958 (paperback) Price £9.99

Reviewed by Julia Peck, University of Roehampton, London

Why It Does Not Have to be in Focus is an accessible book for those who are willing to have their expectations about photography challenged. Containing one hundred 'key works of modern photography' by one hundred artists / photographers, Higgins delineates the numerous formal qualities of the medium in contemporary art, and explores individual works through a series of thematic subheadings. The subheadings aim to 'explain why the photograph is an important work of art' and discuss the 'approach, process and technique' of the artist; Higgins also 'locates the image in its historic and artistic context', and includes other 'incidental information' (7). Further subheadings enable Higgins to include quotes – sometimes by the artist, sometimes by other writers or photographers – and make recommendations for exploring further images by the artist in question.

Higgins is a writer, journalist and filmmaker with an interest in contemporary photography; her previous book *David Bailey: Look* was published in 2010. Higgins' approach in *Why it does not have to be in focus* explicitly addresses the formal and experimental qualities of the medium over its apparent realism; this is, of course, partly given away in the title of the book, but 'focus', or lack of it, is also used to develop the book's premise. Observing that contemporary practitioners produce out-of-focus photographs, Higgins notes that conceptual artists seem to be exploring 'a whole litany of what might be called "photographic errors"' because 'a photograph need not be crisply rendered or "correctly" exposed, colour-balanced, framed or even composed by the photographer in order to have artistic merit' (7).

The structure of the book, split into six categories, is simultaneously interesting and frustrating. Addressing 'Portraiture/Smile'; 'Document/Snap', 'Still Life/Freeze'; 'Narrative/Action'; 'Landscape/Look' and 'Abstracts/Dissolve', the book appears all-encompassing. 'Still Life' is a satisfying category where traditional, oppositional and formally experimental art works are explored side by side. The 'Abstracts/Dissolve' section is worthy of note as it not only explores abstract imagery (challenging the representational qualities of photography) but also examines sculpture, physical interventions in the production of the image, as well as the obsolete yet seductive qualities of the analogue photograph. Catherine Yass's *Damage/Drown/Canal, 168 Hours June 2005*, for example, uses traditional printing processes, combined with deliberately damaging actions (in this case, drowning the photograph in a canal for 168 hours) to further increase the relationship between the subject and its representation. Anxieties about the role of the medium abound but also offer Yass creative opportunities.

The organization of the book through the section categories is also the most problematic part of the book. Important discussions about conceptual art remain underdeveloped and decisions about organization are hard to understand. Ed Ruscha, for example, appears in the 'Document/Snap' section, whilst Keith Arnatt

is in 'Narrative/Action', despite the obvious affinities between their artworks and their practices. Both explore the deadpan style of documentary photography but also examine the premise of documentary by literally exposing some of its problematic and troubling aspects; both of their selected artworks also draw explicit attention to the process of making a photograph. More troublingly, the 'Document/Snap' section prioritises personal and idiosyncratic approaches to documentary over recent developments in 'straight' photography. Straight photography (a style rather than an objective way of working) emphasises the lack of manipulation in its photographic and production process and uses the film and digital technologies that have enabled large-scale production that have developed since the 1980s. The exclusion of 'straight' photography in the book means that important contemplative, but sometimes political, art works are missing from the discussion. This is a significant omission, as it cannot have escaped Higgins' notice that straight photography forms an important part of art photography today. Such approaches have perhaps been excluded for the reason that they are not formally experimental and tend to produce photographs that are technically in focus, but it also means that the book has a notable shortage of political discussion throughout.

An exception to the discussion of conventional documentary approaches is the reproduction of a photograph from *Encounters with the Dani: Stories from the Baliem Valley*, by Susan Meiselas, which aims to represent the indigenous people of the West Papuan highlands. Far from being a traditional ethnographic or 'exotic' portrayal of these people, Meiselas brought together the differing texts and visual representations generated by people who have engaged with or imagined the Dani, including colonisers, missionaries, anthropologists and tourists, in a fragmentary history told from a largely Western perspective. The important multivocality of Meiselas' project, and its relationship with different forms of archival material, however, cannot be adequately represented through the reproduction of a single image, despite Higgins' solid introduction to the project's scope and intention. A book such as this faces significant challenges in introducing an artist through a single art work, although the suggestions for viewing further images obviously attempts to mitigate this. Frustratingly, there is little information in the book regarding the size and presentational form for each image. Although with some photographs there is never a 'final' or exclusive form, with some of the works depicted, such as in Adam Fuss' usually life-size photograms, their physical dimensions are closely allied to their subject and to their resulting meaning.

Inevitably, the hundred works selected for *Why It Does Not Have To Be in Focus* raises questions about exclusions. Higgins' framework is remarkably loose and inclusive; she avoids providing a definition of 'modern photography' or a defense of her approach, and instead indicates that the focus of the book is on 'mostly contemporary artists' (6). Higgins stretches the definition of contemporary artists to include artworks from each decade from 1960 onwards, although Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Behind the Gare Saint Lazare* is from 1932. Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) seems to have been included so that the numerous references to the 'decisive moment' can be illustrated and explained; similarly, Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) may have been included as she rose to prominence in

the past twenty years and has come to occupy a significant place in the discussion of identity politics.

Overall, *Why It Does Not Have to be in Focus* creates many points of frustration for the knowledgeable or academic reader, and is hopeless at addressing recent developments in documentary photography in a structured fashion. Photography as a cultural phenomenon, given the book's focus on arts practice, is necessarily excluded altogether. However, despite these shortcomings, most readers will be introduced to some new artists and artworks, and the book will be useful for undergraduate students who wish to gain a broad overview of photography as art. The explication of each artwork, its production, processes and its historical or theoretical contextualization, is engaging. Interestingly, given the book's introductory purpose, Higgins frequently refers to art movements and concepts that require further reading or explanation. A reader aware of art movements and themes, but less aware of art photography, would feel in safe hands here. Reservations aside, *Why It Does Not Have to be in Focus* is undoubtedly useful for provoking general readers to think about the conventions of photography and how these can be challenged in fruitful ways.