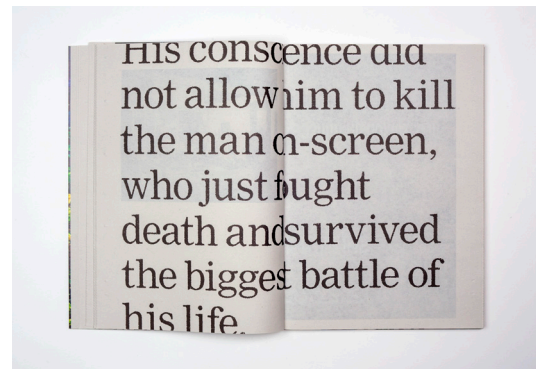


MAX PINCKERS  
FRAMED BY THE NEWS

*The Fourth Wall*, the book with which Max Pinckers graduated in 2012 and immediately stepped onto the international stage, gets its title from the so-called fourth wall in the theatre. This is the imaginary, invisible wall between the audience in the auditorium and the actors on stage (the sides and back of the stage form the other walls). In this way the two—actors and audience—are physically, but also mentally separated from each other. It's no coincidence that Pinckers uses this spatial metaphor as a title for his book, as it is one that also refers to his own photographic practice, in which he questions documentary photography. Pinckers does not believe in the idea of the photographer as an innocent observer in a situation, as a fly on the wall. On the contrary, the presence of the photographer influences the circumstances in which a situation takes place. Pinckers magnifies that idea in his photographs, by using artificial lighting in an open and direct way, like in a studio or on a film set.

In *The Fourth Wall*, which deals with the influence of Bollywood on everyday life in Mumbai, Pinckers not only photographed on actual film sets, he also took to the streets and asked people to recreate their favourite movie scene, to then turn it into a theatrical photograph; a film still, if you will.



(←) ← →  
Max Pinckers, *The Fourth Wall*



In his dramatically lit images Pinckers sets the scene himself; he directs his subjects, but leaves room for coincidence or improvisation. In terms of content, this often leads to confusion for the viewer (is what we see in the image real or fiction, or is it somewhere in between?). Formally, however, he emphatically creates a distance between what takes place in the photograph (within the borders of the photographic frame) and the viewer, just as it happens in the theatre. It is a confirmation that what exists in the photograph, exists in a space of its own, namely within the space of the image, even if there is still a reality outside the frame of that image.

In the images themselves we see all kinds of spaces—some visible, some hidden or illusionary. There are buildings and constructions, holes in the ground and in the wall, cloths and curtains, doors and screens. Soon enough questions arise about what the space is for, or what is behind the screen or beyond the door. Are they real rooms or are they sets? What is decor, what isn't? The book as such becomes a volume in which we not only move from scene to scene, but also from stage to stage. It is something we are made very aware of in Pinckers's books, as it is part of his strategy and method.

The photographs themselves are very ambiguous. The way in which

Pinckers places them in a sequence is often the result of free association; some of the links he makes are quite clear, others are anything but obvious and require insight into the photographer's mind. In such long book sequences—*The Fourth Wall* has 192 pages—structure and rhythm are of the utmost importance in order not to lose the reader along the way. To apply both, he makes clever use of text. Pinckers collected news items, most of them from newspapers (the book was eventually printed on newsprint, partly as a reference to this). Their content invariably deals with situations in which reality and film are mixed up, with all the bizarre and sometimes tragic consequences this entails. Pinckers takes telling quotes from these stories and places them large and full bleed on a white spread, each time in the same newspaper-like font. These recurring spreads of text divide the book into a series of consecutive image clusters, each consisting of a thoughtful and enigmatic image sequence that is concise within its own space—sub-narratives, if you will—, but also clearly part of the larger narrative. Often the image that follows the text is directly linked to or inspired by the story in the news article (the first one refers to the cover image). It gives each new cluster a jump start, so to speak, and makes for a particularly rhythmic reading. Spatially the effect

is somewhat akin to walking from one set to the next; different sets and different scenes that are all part of the same feature film.

This double way of working, in which text not only helps shape the narrative through its content, but through its design and typography also shapes the architecture of the book, is further elaborated and refined by Pinckers in *Will They Sing Like Rainbows or Leave Me Thirsty* (2014). Comprising 232 pages and a more complex subject matter, the book required a further extension of this method.

As in *The Fourth Wall*, Pinckers's own photographs have a strong cinematic feel to them. Once again they are staged and artificially lit, making them look as if they were being made on a film set or in a studio, even though the substantive link with cinema is much less present than in his first book. The set lights and flashes have a very distinctive effect, as they alter the space in the image; even if the image was made outdoors, it feels fictitious and as such separated from the real world. The photographic space is once again very much at the forefront.

If in *The Fourth Wall* interior spaces played a particular part, here it is surface that becomes an important element. On the one hand there is a peculiar attention to walls, beginning with the cover

of the book, which shows a rough black wall that is hit hard with bright white light and splashed with what seems to be bright white milk.<sup>\*63</sup> Flash always emphasizes texture and surface, but throughout the book the idea of the wall starts to feel like a subtle architectural motif. Whether it is a screen, a curtain or a cloth, or even a small waterfall, these walls display distinct surface qualities, and suggest that they might be concealing something from our view. Some surfaces have images on them, communicating something of their own. There are "idealized digital landscapes retrieved from a photo studio, where they are used as backdrops for portraits",<sup>\*64</sup> which are printed on a more glossy paper stock. And then there is the bright blue colour of the walls that are part of a very specific room or building; these form the characteristic background of what is likely the most important and returning type of sequence in the book—more on that in a bit.

Newspapers are once again of narrative and structural importance. There are blown-up newspaper images, printed full bleed on a full spread so that the dots resulting from the half-tone printing process become very visible—here, the very specific surface of the printed images cannot be ignored. Another form they appear in is as small newspaper clippings, usually of short articles.



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Max Pinckers, *The Fourth Wall*  
→ (→)  
Max Pinckers, *Will They Sing Like Rainbows or Leave Me Thirsty*



<sup>\*63</sup> The title of the work is *No Use Crying Over Spilled Milk*. Knowing Pinckers, both the image and its title are highly symbolic in their meaning.

<sup>\*64</sup> Hans Theys, 'Photographs as Poems', in Max Pinckers, *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty*, self-published, 2014.



They are not presented neatly cut; instead they are hastily torn out, showing and almost highlighting all the rough edges. Each time they are placed in the upper outer corner of the page, leaving plenty of white space around them. Structurally, they become little reference points throughout the book.

These newspaper clippings are a significant element within the sequence, not only because of the form they take, but also because of their subject matter. They have the visual quality of an image, while at the same time they provide information through the actual reading of the text. That we recognize them as real news items, as real documents, is important to the narrative, as *Will They Sing Like Rainbows or Leave Me Thirsty* deals with a real documentary subject, the Love Commandos, a non-profit organization in India helping lovers in forbidden relationships.

Text in the book also serves a structural purpose. Blog posts from the Love Commandos are presented throughout the book, on pastel green paper. They are invariably placed on the left, rolling into the page from above and bleeding off the page at the bottom, reminiscent of the scrolling on a computer screen (the previous right page, in the same green paper, is always empty). To the right of the blog post we always find a still life of sorts, a tiny and precise image printed

in the middle of the page, often rich in symbolism. These pages divide the image sequence in parts, they form clear and trustworthy turning points, and as such help the reader navigate the narrative.

In *Will They Sing...*

Pinckers also introduces a new form of movement into his work, a temporization within the sequence. In order to depict the peace and security experienced by couples in hiding with the Love Commandos, he places not one, but several photographs in a cinematic sequence, one after the other and over several pages. The bright blue walls of the hide-out, as mentioned earlier, provide a very recognizable backdrop. Where the images run over the edge of the page, Pinckers uses a Japanese fold, which gives the segment a slightly wavy effect, like a leporello. They are intimate interludes within the book; forbidden love flows gently through these subsequences.

In the back of the book there is an essay, written by Hans Theys, in which Pinckers's practice is explored in more depth. The section titled 'A beautifully constructed book with different elements' is a striking one. In it the author explains that the book consists of different elements, both text and image, "each treated differently on the level of the layout".<sup>\*65</sup> In this part of the text Theys distinguishes the different image series and briefly discusses their function within

the work. He clearly considers it necessary to provide some explanation of the structure of this book, which is complex and multi-layered. Of the copied blog posts and the cinematic sequence within the blue rooms of the Love Commandos (two very recognizable visual elements), Theys writes that "they seem to weave a basic grid for the book".<sup>\*66</sup> This is an astute observation, because in terms of subject matter they also form the foundation of the narrative. Within the solid structure they form, the other elements can move more freely and associatively through the sequence, and through the volume of the book. In his next project, however, Pinckers pushes his methods and strategies even further, resulting in an even more considered architecture of the book.

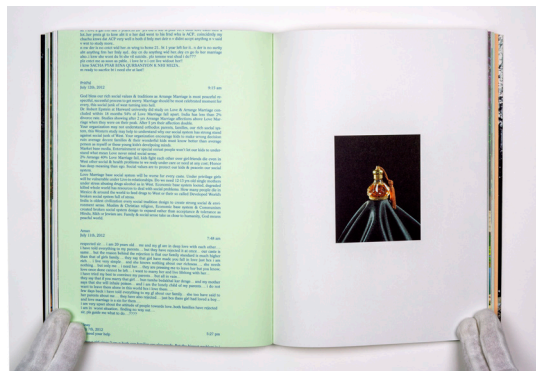
The way that news media grapple with concepts such as truth, lies, half-facts, and fictions in what we now call a 'post-truth' era is the subject of *Margins of Excess*. Made between 2016 and 2017, in the midst of the Trump presidential campaign turmoil, and self-published in 2018, the book brings together the stories of six individuals whose own personal beliefs and truths were dramatically exposed as false or deceiving in the mass media. In between these six main stories Pinckers strings together a freewheeling series of small but

sensational tales of UFOs, cloned military dogs, crying Virgin Marys, suspicious white vans, accidental bombings, and fictional presidents.

As already hinted, *Margins of Excess* is by far Pinckers's most challenging book in terms of assembling a coherent narrative. In terms of imagery, both his own and found in media, his tried and tested recipe of staging, theatrical light and ambiguity remains largely the same. And once again he resorts to the use of news stories as a way to frame the work. However, in a way that is more methodical than before, he also uses these news stories as formal support elements to provide the book's more than three hundred pages with the necessary structure.

As we've seen, this is not the first time that Pinckers has used this strategy, but here he takes it to a more sophisticated level. Each one of the stories begins with a reproduced news article title and introduction on the right page, printed on a slightly thinner, light-grey paper. These articles aren't presented as clippings; a deliberate choice by Pinckers. This way he avoided eclectic visual clutter, and instead created a formal unity between all the chapters' opening texts.

After each news title, the following right page contains a portrait of the story's protagonist, made by Pinckers. Then comes a double spread with a full-bleed image and



\*65 Ibid.

\*66 Ibid.

←  
Max Pinckers, *Will They Sing Like Rainbows or Leave Me Thirsty*

→  
Max Pinckers, *Margins of Excess*



a quote from another news source, reversed out in white on top of the photograph and at the top of the left page, as you would find in tabloid press and gossip magazines. Around halfway through each story comes a fully reproduced news article on the subject—on the same thinner paper used at the beginning of the chapter—clearly recognizable as such by a vertical line flanking the text on the left. Every separate story then concludes with a long interview—conducted by Pinckers and his wife, Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras—with the protagonist, allowing them to tell their version of the story. This is followed by a small archive image on the bottom of the right-hand page. These transcriptions are also printed on thinner—but this time yellow—paper.<sup>\*67</sup>

In between the lead stories, the small tales also have their distinctive and recurring image-text layout. They're also recognizable by a double spread with a full-bleed image with a news quote printed over them, except here the quotes are placed in a smaller font size and in the bottom left corner. Occasionally there are spreads with an image on the right page and a small caption on the left page—save one, where there are images on both pages. Whereas the sections on the six protagonists are very tightly structured, these anecdotes on the side seem to be

more loose and open in terms of their patterns and sequence. In both, text serves its double purpose of adding to the narrative, but also of giving you the perfect indication of where exactly you find yourself within the book.

Moving most freely throughout the whole book, popping up in each type of story, is the enigmatic series of staged and theatrically lit scenes of people or couples in the street, looking shocked, stressed, anxious, or upset. They are all actors—professional mourners, Pinckers calls them—that he used to re-create the type of imagery the media publish when something horrific occurs, like a bombing or a tragic accident: emotionally charged close-ups of people reacting to the event. Pinckers gives no hint of what these fictional events might have been, however. No context is provided; no captions or quotes, nor any other sort of text. Spread out evenly throughout the book and always placed on the bottom of the right-hand page of an otherwise empty spread, they serve as a strange set of neon signs, flickering for your attention.

The narratives Pinckers has created in his successive books have become increasingly complex and layered, deliberately causing confusion at times. It is precisely for this reason that the book is his preferred medium: through its architecture, by designing each room and passageway in perfect

patterns and detail, Pinckers still manages to offer the reader footing and guidance.

<sup>\*67</sup> The first story in the book lacks this interview portion, however, as its protagonist, Herman Rosenblat, died in 2015, one year before Pinckers started photographing the series; for the opening portrait, a stand-in was used.

→ Max Pinckers, *Margins of Excess*

