

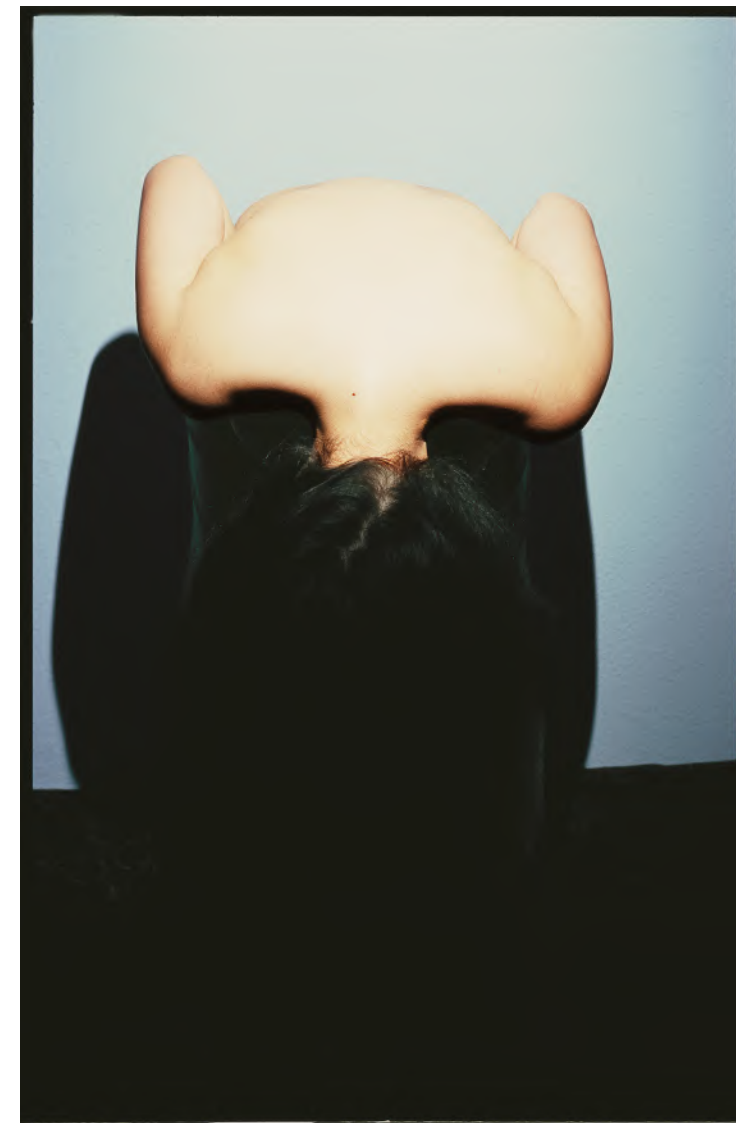
## WHERE THERE'S BEAUTY, THERE'S A PICTURE



*Scrapbooks, 1969–85*

## WALTER PFEIFFER

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*Cherchez la femme!, n.d.*

Walter Pfeiffer's photos of beauty on the street have long been a wellspring for the all-pop look of successive and better-celebrated cameramen. His scrapbooks, which draw from a cobbled together circle of intimate, models, and fellow artists, situate love at the center of queer glamor and are a lure to go steady with an underground flirt. *An interview with Michelle Nicol*



**Michelle Nicol:** In your early years as an artist, in the 1970s, you were a solitaire. Since then, your work has inspired many artists, and your aesthetic has become part of contemporary pop culture.

**Walter Pfeiffer:** I don't think I had such an influence on them. Take Wolfgang Tillmans, for example. I met him at a party: he had no idea who I was.

**MN:** Is making pictures different for you today than when you started?

**MN:** At that time, in my wildest dreams, I would not have imagined achieving what I have today. I was an amateur photographer, which is why I did everything as simply as possible. My models were beautiful, and we had lots of fun. For a long time, I did it just for myself and my group of friends. I experimented because I did not want to get bored. Professional photographers were appalled – I did not have their perfect studio light! Today, when taking pictures, I work with a team of amazing professionals however, the essence of the images has stayed the same.

**MN:** You were at the forefront – and actually established this practice of pop-ifying the everyday.

**WP:** I was very early for sure, and I wasn't known for a long time. Not in my hometown Zurich, nor internationally. Only very die-hard fans reacted to my first book [*Walter Pfeiffer: 1970–1980*].

**MN:** That black-and-white book with a Ken doll on the cover – one hand in his underpants – defined a new visual vocabulary for erotic storytelling and beauty, a flirt with the boys of the subculture.

**WP:** The subject matter was not common. That someone would work with male models exclusively was something new. I'm talking about the 1970s. This was a time when homosexuality was not only a punishable offense, but you would blush if someone simply asked you, "Are you gay?" And even then, you didn't say "gay" at all!

**MN:** What did one say?

**WP:** That someone was a "Fräulein" [Miss], maybe. There were only a few gay bars where people could go. It was very *avant la lettre*. I cobbled together my own group from the



*Cberchez la femme!*, n.d.

people, including straight people who had nothing to do with art. I felt comfortable and started to draw from this abundance.

**MN:** For context, it is necessary to understand that the predominant art in Zurich in the 70s was hardline conceptualism.

**WP:** Exactly.

**MN:** The anti-heroic attitude of your work, dealing as it did with everyday life in a way that was about one's own identity, and working in and as a group – was that a reaction to the atmosphere of that era?

**WP:** Yes. If you look at my *Scrapbooks* from 1970–74, I was always present, though not as the main character.

**MN:** Among the scrapbooks, these wonderful visual diaries with photographs, clippings, receipts, cinema tickets, and handwritten poems, one of my favorite notes is: "where there's beauty, there's a picture."

**WP:** Besides showing beautiful people, I wanted viewers to understand how everything was connected. I was schooled through Hollywood, by the beauty of the stars that fascinated me. Likewise, in the German movies I grew up with, everybody was good-looking, and I wanted this in my life and work as well. But there was plenty of beauty on the streets then, just as there is now. It's everyday life that has always fascinated me and which I have always idealized.

**MN:** After your apprenticeship as a window dresser for a large department store, you studied fine arts at the F+F School for Art and Design in Zurich in its legendary first year.

**WP:** Yes. F+F was founded by teachers from the more traditional Kunstgewerbeschule Zurich [School for Applied Arts]. Everything was super experimental. After studying for two years, I knew the dream was over. I painted an oversized cat head on fiberboard as my final project, working day and night – like I still do today – and listening to the Walker Brothers on the turntable at school. And then I was out and had to make a living for myself.

**MN:** That cat, by the way, was placed at the entrance to your recent retrospective at the Swiss Institute in New York. When did you finish art school?

**WP:** That was in 1967. I took my drawings to the local publishers – at that time, there was

still an *Elle Schweiz*, and they gave me six pages right away. In 1971, I went into business for myself and did commissioned drawings, working from a small room. At one point, Jean-Christophe came by and asked me to make a poster. Later that evening, at one or two o'clock at night, I would go to the club around the corner.

**MN:** The curator Jean-Christophe Ammann?

**WP:** I had done a film poster for the city of Zurich, and he wanted one for the Kunstmuseum Luzern, where he was the director. That's how our time together began. Then he invited me to participate in the "Transformer" exhibition.

**MN:** The legendary 1974 exhibition "Transformer: Aspects of Travesty" was the first major exhibition about sexual self-reflection. The mix of art, pop, and underground culture must have been exciting. David Bowie, Brian Eno, and the New York Dolls did contributions for the catalog, while the participating artists included Urs Lüthi, Luciano Castelli, Alex Silber, Katharina Sieverding, and Jürgen Klauke.

**WP:** I immediately became best friends with Jürgen!

**MN:** Sieverding came to the opening in a corsage?

**WP:** Maybe, yes!

**MN:** The cover of the catalog is a stunning black-and-white image of two iconic outfits casually hanging on a coat rack ...

**WP:** I did that! I had already designed the lettering for the catalog, with "Transformer" in a handwritten, red font. And Jean-Christophe asked me for a photo. So, I did it together with Lisa [Enderli, artist and Walter's long-time muse]: her glass shoes and glittery dress, my jeans, and a checked shirt. I shot it at the communal villa I lived in at the time, which was scheduled for demolition. It was a beautiful place – we used to roller-skate in the corridor.

**MN:** The young rebel outfit?

**WP:** Young rebels never really interested me. [Karlheinz] Weinberger had already done it. No, I wanted the cowboy and the "uber-feminine" in one picture: it was the time of real glamor. Jean-Christophe always pushed me to be more uncompromising. I would often visit him in his office in the museum and show him my latest work. I always came out









Untitled, 1987

like he'd thrown cold water on me, completely depressed. He would just say, "You're not doing enough, you petit bourgeois. More sex! More, more!" I took that to heart. I was young and I wanted to learn.

**MN:** Was "Transformer" the first high point in your career as an artist?

**WP:** I never felt it was a high point. I occupied one wall in the show with the "Carlo" portraits (1973) in A4 format. I shot them in my ice-cold studio near the former Selnau train station in Zurich. A photographer friend lent me his professional equipment – I owned only a polaroid camera. The "Carlo" series was also included in my recent New York show. After "Transformer," Li Tobler – H.R. Giger's then-muse and girlfriend – invited me to organize my first-ever solo exhibition, at her gallery. I showed photographs of my favorite models, collaged onto different fabric backgrounds. My stars used to come to my villa in Zurich. I always let them do something, like eating, showering, or playing cards. I needed to keep them busy for the camera. I still do that today. I hate this posing bullshit.

**MN:** After that, you lived in London for a short period. How did that come about?

**WP:** My friend Claude [Xyländer] had one of the first boutiques in Zurich for boho chic, all the pop-star girls were wearing her clothes. It was called Galaxy, right by Café Odeon. I met her husband there, Peter Phillips, one of the first British Pop artists. He invited me to the London opening of an exhibition by Allen Jones, who was showing his table sculptures for the first time: mannequin women in latex, either

kneeling or with their feet up in the air, arranged as furniture. It was extraordinary, just fantastic.

**MN:** Warhol once said, "I never met a person I couldn't call a beauty." What is your relationship with Andy Warhol?

**WP:** In art school, the teacher taught us all kinds of things about Duchamp, Warhol, and Cage: the avant-garde. At one point, he mentioned Warhol and said, "He's a homosexual," which was unbelievable to the teacher. For me, it meant that I started doing research, and together with Matthias Brunner [film curator and founder of Arthouse Cinemas in Zurich], we ordered Warhol's *Interview* magazine from the film bookshop – Matthias and myself were the only people in Zurich who had copies at the time.

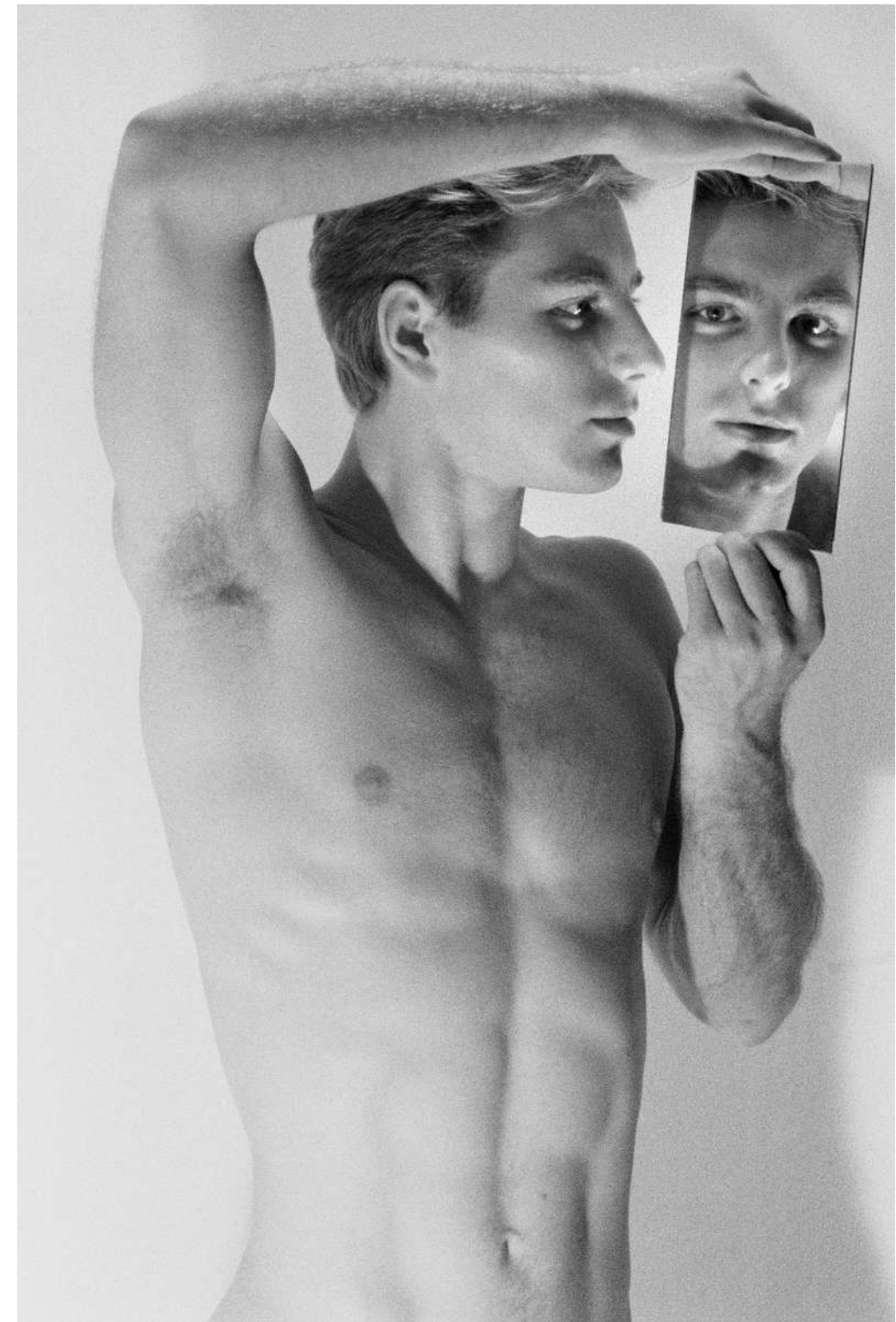
**MN:** Like Warhol, you love beauty and seduction. You once said, "I want my models to be like peaches: they can't be erotic enough."

**WP:** But that's a lie! [laughs] I'd have to add that they shouldn't be boring. What good is a boring peach to me? I love people with a sense of humor, people who are awake. We don't have to hold deep discussions, but they must inspire me.

**MN:** Also like Warhol, you were obsessed with celebrities, at a moment when a celebrity culture in the contemporary sense did not exist. You once told me that, on a field trip with your art school, you were sitting in front of a Rembrandt at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam ...

**WP:** Yes, we were sitting in front of *The Night Watch* [1642]. Everyone was studying and marveling, the teacher was talking. I looked to the back

How do I enter the room, or how do I include everyone? If you get it wrong, you have a problem.



Untitled, n.d.



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of the gallery, and there were Gunter Sachs and Brigitte Bardot coming through the door! I was basically knocked flat – but the others didn't even notice! They were the most beautiful couple of the 60s, and it was 1966. So beautiful, both of them, and so sexy.

**MN:** It is part of your artistic practice to do commissioned work. Since 2010, you are represented by Art & Commerce in New York, and you have produced major imagery and campaigns for Bottega Veneta, Gucci, APC, Ferragamo, and Helmut Lang, as well as editorials for Vogue, W Magazine, i-D, Self Service, and so many more. Your artwork is always authentic and real. How do you stay true to yourself?

**WP:** I always do what's right for me. I don't want to know too much about a shoot beforehand. I show up on set, and then I have to swim. Everybody and everything can inspire me, whether it's a prop, a hairdresser, or a stylist. I am a sponge that soaks everything up. I love it when I can just try things, and it usually turns out

alright in the end. Sometimes, I will do a still life on set, just for myself, and it winds up in the final selection.

**MN:** Today, you photograph famous people all over the world: is that still exciting? Whose portrait do you want to take next?

**WP:** I already worked with big stars forty years ago. When I was the graphic designer for the posters of the Locarno film festival, I once had to pick up Bianca Jagger from her hotel room. She was getting dressed and asked me which outfit she should wear. I said: the yellow one with the black dots. And she looked fabulous! Supermodels are often too perfect. I love to photograph normal street beauties; they are flowers that can wither quickly. Usually, I do my best work with women. Men can be a bit cocky.

**MN:** Are they afraid of you?

**WP:** I think so. Never the women, at least not the really famous ones. After ten minutes, the ice is broken. In the beginning, they might think, "Uh, what's up with the shaky old man?" In the end, though, there's always a great atmosphere. I also learned a lot while teaching my



Untitled, 1996

students – how do I enter the room, or how do I include everyone? If you get it wrong, you have a problem.

**MN:** You love to be surrounded by new energy. What inspires you today?

**WP:** I always love the new. Nothing déjà vu, please. When your antennae are on, it's all good.

I love the natural – mountains, for example – but also the artificial. When I ask a beauty if I may take their picture, I am always nervous.

What I really hate is a "No." I can't handle rejection.

**MN:** What is your next project?

**WP:** My big exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern will open this summer, along with my next book, with photographs from 2000 to today. It will be a wild mix: private work, commissioned work, editorials, stars, everyday people, still lives.

**MN:** Last question – is beauty scary?

**WP:** It's a capital swear word!



Walter Pfeiffer portrayed by Bogislav Ziemer

*WALTER PFEIFFER* (\*1946, Beggingen, Switzerland) lives in Zurich. Recent solo shows took place at Swiss Institute, New York (2022); Fotomuseum Winterthur (2008); Centre Cultural Suisse, Paris (2004). He participated in the group shows "Sommer des Zögners," Kunstballe Zürich (2020); "Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins," Barbican Gallery, London (2018); "The Death of the Audience," Secession, Vienna (2009). In 2023, Pfeiffer will open a retrospective at Kunstmuseum Luzern and publish a monograph with Edition Patrick Frey.

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