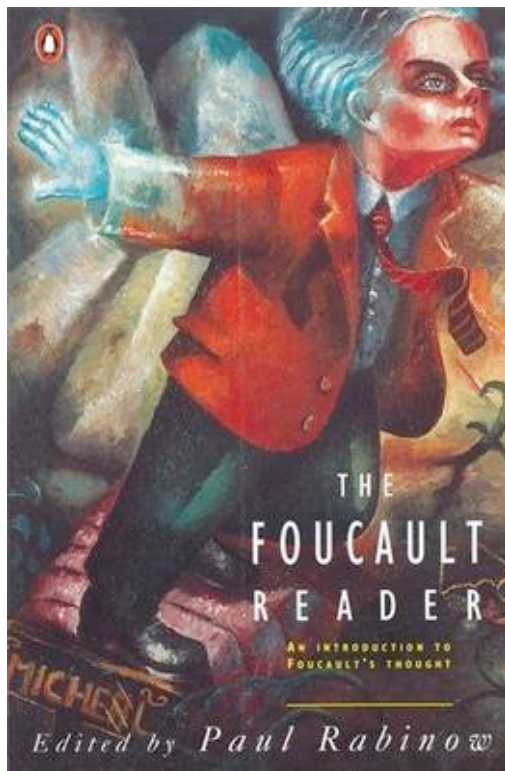


The Idea of Wrong

In a world saturated by perfect images and every app available ready to spruce up your photo, why is Wrong such a good starting point? As a lecturer in photography, it took a long time to understand why it is such a central theme in projects with my students, but there were a few key moments that helped cement it as central to our practice and that ensured it would figure strongly in every project.

A good old friend of mine is Professor of Psycholinguistics, which is the psychology of language. What really surprised me about his studies was that he wasn't interested in testing people who's communication was working fine. Rather, he would get more results and better understanding from investigating when people had difficulty with speech. For example, one of the studies included making a huge database of errors people made in day to day conversation. Strangely, these mounted into the thousands and were classified into different kinds of mistakes, such as repeats or mispronounced words.



So why is this important to photographers concerned with the idea of wrong? Well, it dawned on me that the investigation of deviation is key to psychology and happens everywhere in psychological research from social interaction to processing of emotions in the brain. We can understand things better when they are abnormal.

My first tutor on Foundation at Saint Martins introduced me to Michelle Foucault. "Read it", he said, giving me *The Foucault Reader* by Paul Rabinow. I was stunned with his generosity and obliged. That book changed my life and sadly I can't remember his surname, but Simon, if you are out there: thank you. What I realised, was Foucault's very special way of thinking. His

particular kind of epistemology meant looking at the margins of society to have a better understanding of ourselves. Hence his fascination with, and titles like, *Discipline and Punish*, or *Madness and Civilization*.

Later, my tutor at the Slade, Stella Santacatterina, a brave and fierce Italian intellectual and one of the most knowledgeable and curious people I have ever met, took a look at my work and directed me towards the discussions of Julia Kristeva. I was struck strongly by the idea of the Abject, an element within that is completely ignored because it is so repulsive it cannot be acknowledged.

I quickly realised that there will always be an element of wrongness within, that the very idea of right and perfection demanded that the wrong be ignored. Moreover, it was an artistic trait to scratch at the accepted notions of correctness and explore the wrong. This trait of exposing the wrong makes society think differently about itself and is what makes great work stand out. It is the act that draws discourse through confronting our own preconceptions.

The wrongs exposed can be practical, attempting something through an unaccepted method or with experimental material, thus driving the interest in the medium itself. It can also be conceptual, by drawing attention to the subject matter presented by the medium.



Bruce McLean, *Pose Work for Plinths 3*, 1971

There are countless great examples of this, such as Bruce McLean's photographs being on the margins of photography and sculpture. They drew attention to the possibility of a relationship between photography and sculpture we were unaware of. Or Moholy-Nagy's abstractions, which confused our traditional view of photography as documenting the world with a clear figurative subject. On a social vein, Nan Goldin's, intensely personal photographs also represent that very abject element of society that most

would class as wrong, but are nevertheless people with the same rights and dignity as you or I.



Nan Goldin, *Gotscho Kissing Giles*, 1993

So how does this idea of wrong relate to teaching? I've learnt that engaging learners with charged topics that look at these areas helps them to rapidly have a new perspective on artistic practice. Challenging topics like trauma, schizophrenia, homelessness or the after life as part of projects mean they can start to answer some of their own questions about life that only artistic practice as investigation would allow them to do.

The idea that students need to do the "right" photography, "knowing the rules, before breaking them" is still relevant. Rules being equivalent here to the idea of the "right" way things should be done. Perfect exposures, processing, aperture etc. These rules may be more clear in design where work has to cater for an audience and client needs, but what about in fine art photography that is less easy to measure?

Students can approach this question in a very different manner. They can ask a question about what attitude they can have to their practice. What process of learning is going to get them the furthest? Are they allowed to make mistakes? In fact, should they actively try to make mistakes and scratch at the borders of what is expected of them?

My studio group each recently made a publication covering this. Combining typography, book arts and photography, the work sought to communicate an idea of how to ask important questions and not to settle for the "right". What we all learnt from this is that "wrong" is not a thing. They realised that there

are no right and wrong things, only things that pretend, that coerce and discriminate against people. In the end, wrong is not an object of any form, but a way of doing things that doesn't settle. Here are some pictures from their manifesto to doing wrong.



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