

MICHAEL WOLF: Striking photos show the reality of the Tokyo commute by Fiona Macdonald on website BBC Culture on June 23th 2017

Striking photos show the reality of the Tokyo commute



Michael Wolf began documenting the crush of the Tokyo subway in 2010. Now, as the final edition of his series is published, the German photographer talks to Fiona Macdonald about images that have regularly gone viral over the past seven years.

By Fiona Macdonald
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Like the shapes of bodies frozen by ash in Pompeii – an exaggerated arm movement, or an open mouth breathing onto a window dripping with condensation – many of the people in Michael Wolf's Tokyo Compression photos appear forced into odd poses. Yet these are unstaged images: the positions adopted simply show the everyday contortion of the subway commute.

After Wolf won a World Press Photo award for one of the images in 2010, he visited a publisher in Tokyo with a portfolio of the images. "He just flicked through them in about 30 seconds, and he said 'so what?'," the German photographer tells BBC Culture, as a new exhibition of his work opens at Flowers Gallery in London. "I said 'what do you mean "so what?" – it's a nightmare, don't you see that?' He said: 'what do you mean it's a nightmare, I've been doing this for 40 years of my life every day – it's normal.'"

The normality of a daily journey takes on a poetic quality in Wolf's photos. Pressed against train windows or fellow passengers, many of the commuters have their eyes closed, choosing to go inwards, appearing to enter some kind of trance. "You can't change the situation – so the only way to do it is to compartmentalise, put it somewhere in your brain where it doesn't get to you," says Wolf. "You suffer through it in the morning, you suffer through it on the way back, and that's just the way it is: don't dwell on it."



This is one of the images Michael Wolf took in 1995, when he was a photojournalist (Credit: Michael Wolf, Courtesy of Flowers Gallery)



The final edition of Wolf's Tokyo Compression series has just been published, bringing to a close a project that had its beginnings more than 20 years ago. "I was sent to Tokyo by Stern magazine in 1995, after the Sarin gas attacks," says Wolf. "At one point I arrived at this subway station where all these pictures are photographed. It's a unique station because there's only a single track going in, so you have a platform on the opposite side of the train which is directly at the windows with no track separating you. I was there for 10 minutes and I took five or six images of people leaning against the windows looking rather forlorn; it wasn't even rush hour."

He noticed the images a few weeks later while editing the work, and decided to save them to revisit in the future. "In 2010, 15 years later, I had some time on my hands and I went through the folder and found these five slides, and I thought 'why don't I go back to that train station and see if I can do something with it?'"

It wasn't easy to find, however. "I had no idea if it was still around, in my photographs I didn't have the name of the station," says Wolf. He hired a researcher, who found the subway line based on details on the doors. "All the subway lines belong to different companies, and each one has its unique decal. She said 'oh, that's the Odakyu line' – and then I flew to Tokyo and took the Odakyu line and at every station I got out and eventually I found it."

Wolf returned to Shimo-Kitazawa station every year between 2010 and 2013. "I went there four years in a row, I went every year for four weeks, and every time I somehow came back with some more intense images," he says. "I went there every morning from 7.45 until 8.50, which is peak rush hour, and every 80 seconds a train comes in. I would have 30 seconds to photograph before the train moved again."

He soon worked out exactly what he was looking for. "When I looked through the viewfinder I saw it," he says. "I had one train section in front of me, I couldn't do the whole train in 30 seconds, so there were three windows. I could see right away if there was something good in the window or not, and if not I would go up to the next one. I knew what I wanted, and I would shoot it, and the train would pull away and I'd wait until the next one came in." The latest book is called *The Final Cut*, because the train station no longer exists – on 25 March 2013, the whole line went underground.

The portraits are at the other end of the scale from Wolf's giant photos of high rises in Hong Kong, where he has been based since 1994. Yet both projects contain a feeling of claustrophobia. "One of the things I always liked doing was not letting the viewer be able to escape from the picture," Wolf told BBC Culture in 2014.

That intensity has won him awards – Tokyo Compression was shortlisted for the 2017 Prix Pictet – and meant that the images have been widely shared. "Tokyo Compression goes viral every year," says Wolf. "Somehow, a big generic blog picks it up and they show the pictures – 'the nightmare of Tokyo commutes' – and 20 others piggyback on it, and it goes on a month and dies down, and then a year later it's discovered again."

He isn't dismissive of that popularity, instead putting it down to the universal appeal of the photos. "If you see these pictures, you immediately know what it's about, and you feel empathy for the people who are suffering this, and you immediately connect with the downside of what's happening in our urban society, part of my larger topic, life in cities – you immediately connect with them, no matter who you are."

It's a connection that means Wolf's images don't seem mocking in any way. "I'm very close to my subject, and it's not always easy – there's a discussion I've had many times, 'how do you think the people feel about you photographing them? Did you get permission?' Obviously I can't get permission, there's a pane of glass separating us, so either I do it or not," he says.

Instead of exposing or exploiting, Wolf's portraits radiate intimacy. An essay in Wolf's latest book explores that feeling of cramped proximity: "Nowhere do we come closer, involuntarily, to our neighbour than in the underground," writes Christian Schüle. "The underground is a conspiratorial venue for human excesses: the enforced compression of anxiety, sorrow, pain, madness and fury."

Like the collective outbreath of the whole carriage, condensation is a visible reminder of that compression: a giant sigh forming water on the windows. "Someone should collect it and distill it, and make a perfume out of it: Big City Scent," laughs Wolf. "Damien Hirst would do it, and sell it for a million dollars: the concentrated sweat of a million commuters, in one little vial."

The condensation also adds a dark side to Tokyo Compression. "I have pictures of hands that have wiped away the condensation, and it looks almost like they were writing a message on the window – in Japanese calligraphy – 'help me, this train is taking me away, I'm trapped, call the police'. Those are the thoughts I had when I was shooting those images."

But surprisingly, many of the commuters appear peaceful rather than anguished, as though they have retreated within. "When people meditate, they close the finger and the thumb in the 'om' position, and that appears in quite a few pictures," says Wolf. "Their eyes are closed, their fingers are in a certain position, I guess they're just withdrawing. You have to withdraw if you're an hour in that."

