

## Happy Accidents: Niklas Taleb Philipp Hindahl

It is easy to feel like an intruder when looking at Niklas Taleb's photographs of familial intimacy. They hinge on fleeting moments and spontaneity—that spark lighting up the myth of the “artless snapshot.”

Think of *Wesen* (2021)—meaning “being” or “creature”—which shows a young child from above, in motion as if dancing, sunlight playing on the floor. Or *Untitled (Tripping/Trapping)* (2021), where the same kid is motion-blurred and relegated to the background behind a chair, after which the image is named. The blurred, spectral toddler and her self-contained, serious childhood world take center stage; the colors are subdued, as in most of Taleb's pictures, in a pleasant way that betrays the hand of a professional.

*Reverse psychology* (2020) is a more conventional portrait. A small girl—again the artist's daughter—looks unsmilingly across a breakfast table, straight at the camera; a hand holding a smartphone protrudes from the right edge into the frame. The child's gaze is morose but curious. The eye of the camera invades her thoughtful world, embedded in the scene of a family breakfast surrounded by a half-empty glass of milk, a sliced orange, a half-eaten pastry on the table.

It starts with the small: the family snapshot, wrote the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “is a ritual of the domestic cult in which the family is both subject and object.”<sup>1</sup> Some critics of Taleb's work have gotten hung up on the word *snapshot*. “I don't think the term is terrible,” Taleb says over Zoom, “but I don't feel like it is completely accurate either. I noticed that images in an art context are often clearly composed and arranged. This is not always the case for photography.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the question of staging and composition becomes almost irrelevant as Taleb manages to arrange his images in a way where nothing seems haphazard.

The critic Janet Malcolm once wrote that “all the canonical works of photography retain some trace of the medium's underlying, life-giving, accident-proneness,”<sup>3</sup> and it is tempting to say that Taleb, too, leaves his process wide-open for happy accidents. “I generally work intuitively with the image,” he affirms. “I counter expectations, and I like it when you feel like you've seen something already, but not in this way.”

Taleb has always found inspiration for his subjects in his personal environment. When he was younger, he started taking pictures while skating; he was not a particularly good skater, he claims, but photography stayed as a way of archiving, an idea that remained a vital part of his practice. Since the mid-2010s, as he began taking pictures with a digital camera, Taleb kept his photos in dated folders. When selecting the images for an exhibition, he starts with one and adds others, as if composing a mixtape. The moment, whether captured with intent or on a whim, gets a second life and an uncanny significance, like a readymade.

Taleb's show at Lucas Hirsch's gallery in Düsseldorf was titled *Dream again of a better Generationenvertrag* (2020). The German word literally means “generational contract,” the principle that the German retirement fund hinges on, but here it takes on another meaning: more vague and

turned into a metaphor, it speaks of family and the hopes placed on future generations.

For the exhibition, Taleb crafted the frames himself. The photos are placed under glass and on paper, through which tape is sometimes visible. One of the most delightfully strange images on view, *Ohne Titel (Hannover)* (2020), is odd already in its layout: the portrait-format photo is placed in a landscape frame. The abundant white space left and right thereby creates a kind of triptych, which is fitting given the devotional content. A golden Buddha statue, lavishly surrounded by flowers, fruit bowls, and candles, appears in the background of the picture, which was taken in a pagoda in Hannover during the Vietnamese New Year celebration. The young man in the foreground, depicted in an oversized double-breasted suit, without shoes, smiles furtively, not at the camera but at someone outside the photos' space.

Frames create an aesthetic barrier between gallery space and artwork, a technique repeated in *Sockels* (2022), the haphazard baseboards Taleb applied for this show. Like a joke about the boundaries of the exhibition space, this installation recalls the strategies photographers have used for decades—think of the idiosyncratic way in which Wolfgang Tillmans would tape his prints to the museum wall, as if to defy the sacralization that is inherent in institutions, a carefully staged contingency.

Taleb's recent show *'s Place* (2022) at 15 Orient, an apartment in Brooklyn, has a fittingly domestic setting for his digital prints, some of which show a child's drawings, while others are self-portraits. *Main Character Syndrome (2)* (2022) hints at something even more uncanny, at least at first glance. The photo shows a shadow in the corner of a room that the artist captured when his daughter passed in front of a bright table lamp.

This may recall the Greek origin of the word “photography,” “drawing with light,” when actually the image is a consequence of a child's game. The shadow is the visible sign of someone's presence and a space for projections and future potential. As soon as these pictures leave the private space, when viewed via the iconography of the family snapshot, the universal and the particular become hard to distinguish.

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 19.

2 All artist quotes are from a conversation with the author on May 11, 2022.

3 Janet Malcolm, “The Family of Mann,” *New York Review of Books*, February 3, 1994, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1994/02/03/the-family-of-mann/>.

137 Niklas Taleb, *Untitled (Tripping/Trapping)*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf

138 139 Niklas Taleb, *Wesen*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf

140 141 Niklas Taleb, *'s Place* installation views at 15 Orient, New York, 2022.

Courtesy: the artist and 15 Orient, New York





