

Hot Shots

Around the world, more than 2,700 photographs are taken every second. Most are developed and printed in photo-labs, where staff see images of hundreds of families every day. Robert Harks (30) from Eindhoven, the Netherlands, gives us an insider's view from behind the desk. **Interview: Pauline Bax**



Yes, I am an aspiring photographer, why else would I work in a photo lab? Pictures are being developed and printed every day right here under my nose. Pictures made by professionals, by amateurs, by ordinary people. Would I call them ordinary pictures? Well they're taken by people with simple cameras, no technical experience and hardly any visual education. But the photos are not necessarily ordinary.

"Of course, holiday snaps are our bread and butter. Vacation pictures take up 80 percent of our time. It's easy to recognize them. If the beach doesn't give it away, the Loved-One-in-Front-of-Famous-Building will. I've probably seen more sunsets in this office than I will ever see in real life. A picture postcard would have served the same purpose but somehow everybody wants to snap a sunset. And it always results in a blurry picture with a dash of pink sky above and impenetrable darkness beneath. There's a certain type of picture we come across often. It's when a guy snaps his wife or girlfriend topless. Usually she sticks her tongue out as well, in a gesture of mock sexiness. Or she points to her tattoo. Maybe it's meant to be sexy or funny or mysterious, but believe me, when you're confronted with the same pose over and over again, you can't help but think of it as pathetic. People look more genuine when they're not aware of the camera. I suppose taking silly pictures is just a way for people to have fun.

"Most customers seem to suffer from such a severe lack of imagination that I start to question my own ability to contribute some striking images to this world. You've seen it on TV, so you copy it in your holiday picture. But who am I to judge? Maybe they're just keeping it simple so that they don't have to figure out which picture was taken where once they get home.

"I hate to admit it, but the spice of our life is in the dirty pictures. Unfortunately we, the developers, don't deal directly with customers anymore. There's nothing quite like a customer walking in the door and you recognizing him from some picture where he's sitting on a bed in a state of undress. We don't get off on it; it's just that you keep wondering what they're going to do with a picture like that. Where will they keep it, will they show it to anyone? Another popular subject is . . . well let's say some men want to immortalize a very common and necessary daily ritual. Humankind really looks vulnerable when naked in front of the camera. It's almost endearing sometimes.

"Every so often it's depressing to work in a place like this. I tend to get a bit cynical about the purpose of it all. There are so many pictures in this world. And a lot of them will never even be glanced at. It's kind of sad." @

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