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The photobook: everyone a publisher?

Digital technology, and e DIY and print-on-demand photobooks have transformed contemporary photography book publishing, however the creative and innovative influence that graphic designers have brought to the artists' books now extending into the photobook artform.

Over recent years the photographically illustrated book has undergone a massive makeover, in effect freeing it from traditional publisher controls. Digital technologies have been the major cause of this paradigm shift due to the democratisation of photography, new production technologies, and new funding and marketing platforms. The 19th-century polymath Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the positive/negative process for photography, was so enthusiastic about the potential for his discovery that he made a prediction for a future where: 'Every man [would be] his own printer and publisher'.¹ It would now seem that Talbot's prediction has come to pass.

Increased public access to book publishing is particularly important for those photographers and artists who employ the camera and the photograph in their art practices.

Photographers desire books

Photographers usually have libraries of the photobooks made by their mentors, or which explore themes that interest them. These collected books bring the world of photography to the photographer's lap and are more accessible

than the rare ‘time-and-place’-based opportunity to see an exhibition of photographs from an influential or important photographer at a gallery.

The passion of photographers for photographically illustrated books intensifies when their interest shifts from the books made by others to the desire for a book of their own work. Darius Himes and Mary Virginia Swanson state in their 2011 book *Publish Your Photography Book* that for the photographer, having their own book published is: ‘a major milestone, an indicator of success and recognition, and a chance to place a selection of one’s work in the hands of hundreds, if not thousands, of people’. They add that: ‘... it is just plain exciting to hold a book of your photographs!’²

Coinciding with the appeal of books to photographers is the rapid rise in the number of people taking photos. This rise has been powered by increased access to imaging technologies (via cheap digital cameras, smartphones and tablets) and instant publication (via social media platforms). In today’s world, everyone is a photographer and their view and experience of life (the usual subjects of social media posts) are consumed and rapidly turned over on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. This has led some photographers to desire a more permanent method for recording their narrative, which they have found in the physical book.

A new term emerges

The earliest photographically illustrated books, called ‘albums’, incorporated photographs as original tipped-in prints.³ Lucien Goldschmidt and Weston J Naef used the term ‘photographically illustrated book’ for their 1980 survey *The Truthful Lens: A Survey of the Photographically Illustrated Book 1844-1914*.⁴ In 1995, bookmaker and scholar Johanna Drucker used the term ‘photographic book’ in *The Century of Artists’ Books*⁵ and, in 2002, the Apple Computer program iPhoto introduced ‘photo book’ as a product term for their online computer-to-book service.

The emergent term ‘photobook’, or ‘photo book’, has been adopted in the seminal text on the subject, *The Photobook: A History* by photographer Martin Parr and photo historian Gerry Badger, the first volume of which was released in 2004.⁶ Reviewing Parr and Badger’s work, photographer Tim McLaughlin made the following observation: “The term “photobook” which never really existed before Parr and Badger (most dictionaries still do not recognize it), would, within a few years, come to identify a growing industry ...”⁷

A new critique forms for the photobook

Guy Lane, in an interview with Martin Parr, reported that: ‘Parr holds

academics and historians culpable for the marginalisation and neglect of a medium [the photobook] which he considers a driving force in the development of photography'.⁸ Parr claims that historians and curators have overlooked the book, concentrating instead on an accepted canon of great photographs by key photographers: their focus has been the print and the gallery wall. Parr and Badger's history aimed to 'redress the balance', and has driven a new wave of literature in which the photobook is recognised as central to the history and the practice of photography.

The photobook has been explained as having certain qualities or characteristics. Badger and Parr define it as 'a book – with or without text – where the work's primary message is carried by photographs'.⁹ Andrew Roth, editor of *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (2001) offers a more detailed description of his expectations of a photobook, including high production values, 'the specific photographer or the historical significance and impact of the work', and the distinction that 'the images were destined to be seen printed in ink and bound between covers'.¹⁰

Importantly it has been recognised that encountering a photobook is more than a connection with the physical object of the book and the turning of pages, it is also an experience. Dutch historian Ralph Prins states that:

A photobook is an autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film. The photographs lose their own photographic character as things 'in themselves' and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.¹¹

Concurrent with these discussions about the nature of photobooks are numerous texts discussing photobooks from regions of the world, including Japan, South America and Holland. A community of academics and commentators has formed to support critical debate about the discipline. The extended photobook family includes book buyers, book designers, niche publishers, organisers of awards and events, clubs, collectors, peers, critics, commentators and judges of competitions and awards. These stakeholders help define and shape the direction of the photobook discipline.

A new accessibility to book production

Traditionally, most photobooks were published by a production team that included a writer, publisher, designer, printer, binder, marketer and a bricks-and-mortar bookstore. Associated with the emergence of the photobook is a new publishing paradigm – that of DIY self-publishing. Here the photographer – any photographer – can create their own book using online print-on-demand



M mmo Cozzo no, Arcadia del Sud Heidelberg Melbourne Australia circa 1966, Eag emont, V ctor a, pub shed by the art st, 2011

(POD) technologies and can access a range of photobook publishing products. Further to this, the DIY publisher can market and sell their book online outside the conventional physical networks.

This accessibility is a direct result of digital technologies that enable photographers to use design software to create books and then upload them to POD service providers. These technologies have transformed book production into a series of steps that can produce a traditional hardbound book in minutes at an affordable price.

Hundreds of thousands of serious photobook self-publishers have availed themselves of the POD revolution. The international Photo Marketing Association predicted that, by 2014, the number of photobooks made worldwide through POD suppliers would exceed 150 million units.¹² While that may seem to be an amazing number of books, they are mainly the 'vernacular' form (i.e. non-artistic), with content including personal events, weddings, school assignments, holidays and the family pet.

Digital technologies in the home enable a photographer to design a book, print their own pages and, with basic bookbinding tools and skills, make their own bespoke books.

The problem of funding a book has largely been resolved by crowdsourcing platforms like Pozible, Kickstarter and Indiegogo. These online services enable entrepreneurs to seek start-up funding from social media networks. A project, such as a photobook, can be promoted through a network for a set period of time. The project instigator offers rewards for pledges of financial support and continues to promote their project for the duration of the fundraising period. If the project receives sufficient funds, supporters are billed, rewards supplied and the photobook project becomes a reality.

The happy self-publisher

This new generation of photographer/publishers are part of a growing indie movement that satisfies its desire to communicate through the form of the book. In *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books* (1998), Brian Wallis discusses emergent publication forms arising from the artists' book and zine or fanzine culture of the 1990s. He describes such books as being 'democratic forms of speech', which 'mirror values to social groups still groping for an identity and a sense of collective purpose'.¹³

Self-published photobook communities have established their own markets, distribution points and bookshops, not to mention online marketing through a range of boutique sales websites like Etsy, monetised Facebook pages and eBay. Many online organisations and collectives have emerged to nurture various levels of photobook publishing including Perimeter Books and the Asia-Pacific Photobook Archive (Australia); Self Publish, Be Happy and The Photobook Club (United Kingdom); The Photobook Museum (Cologne); and, the Indie Photo Library (United States). The photobook network is replete with blogs, websites and commentators, such as 5B4, Bint Photobooks, Harvey Benge, Doug Stockdale's The Photobook blog, Photoeye and Darius Himes, who report, comment, critique and promote both old and new books. Bruno Ceschel, the founder of the photobook organisation Self Publish, Be Happy, states that '[e]xperimentation, boldness, love for the printed object and a desire to be heard' drive the photobook self-publishing genre in the new millenium. It is interesting to note that Ceschel's range of published products includes everything from the 'stapled fanzine assembled in a student bedroom to the traditionally printed photobook[;] these publications not only reshape our understanding of the medium but offer exciting and sometimes radical ideas.'¹⁴

The artist book and self-publishing

The artist book discipline is another publishing territory without clear boundaries. Those who make artists' books, like indie photobook makers, are not constrained by rules and traditions that result in unchallenging, 'safe' works because they have generally worked outside the mechanisms of commercial publishing. Certainly artists intend their books to communicate concepts and ideas and some do offer them for sale using networks similar to the photobook self-publishers.

As artists challenge traditions and break rules, every aspect of the book – its shape and size, the juxtaposition of texts and images, the binding and construction materials, and its functionality (how pages are to be viewed or

turned) – can be deconstructed or reconstructed in a personal interrogation of the form. The resulting book could be a unique state object, a small-run limited edition or a mass-produced trade-like publication.

The artists' book maker makes decisions about form, construction methods, ways in which narrative can be expressed, the use of typographic styling and production values. A driver for the freedom and innovation of artists' books is their historical connection with avant-garde graphic designers, many of whom also shared an interest in photography and the photographic book.

A new challenge emerges: design my book

Designing a photobook, or any book for that matter, is a specialised skill. For the indie photobook maker, the challenge may start with questions like, what kind of book? Will I design it, or should I collaborate with someone else? To investigate the potential for their book, the photographer refines their idea by preparing a book 'dummy'. In this process they make decisions about the size of the book, construction, number of pages and even paper stock. The same definitive workflow takes place with POD online books. This method relates to the trade workflow and the need for the publisher to gain printers' quotes for the book, liaise with a designer and assess the book's suitability for paying clientele.

Although some photographers operating in the indie DIY mode design their books with little regard for traditional design conventions, many photobook makers wish to develop skills that enhance their publications. To fill this potential knowledge gap, a range of publications have emerged to teach photographers book publishing, design and production skills. As Darius Himes and Virginia Mary Swanson note, while new digital technologies 'have placed more tools for bookmaking directly into the hands of photographers', few photographers 'have more than a limited grasp of the component parts of a book, an understanding of what they want to express, or the know-how to get a book published'.¹⁵

The Himes and Swanson book advocates a publishing pathway involving consultation with designers and traditional printers and binders. This places the photographer's idea in the hands of other creatives and embraces the transformative influence that this might bring to the project. In 2004, graphic designer and writer Adrian Shaughnessy reported in the journal *Eye* that photobook design is often a tussle between the photographer and their readymade proposition, and the designer who wants a 'blank canvas' on which to be as 'as adventurous and audacious as they want'. He discussed conceptual limitations, such as the photographer's 'sacrosanct' rule that there can be



Louis Porter, *Bad Driving*, East Brunswick, Victoria, And Collective, 2011

Lloyd Stubber, *Scram*, Melbourne, published by the artist, [2010]

‘no tampering’ or cropping of the image, and Shaughnessy’s own belief that the repetition of similarly scaled images page after page in a book results in ‘uniformity, sterility and repetitiveness’.¹⁶

Ten years ago, Shaughnessy challenged book designers and photographers to:

capture in book form the shifting boundaries of the image, and our endless changing perception of photography – and to show that intelligent, provocative design can enhance our appreciation of the photographs themselves.¹⁷

Shaughnessy’s call for ‘intelligent, provocative design’ is answered by the number of significant photobooks, of all types, that are resulting from photographer/designer collaborations. One such example is photobook self-publisher Ying Ang who, in July 2014, published *Gold Coast*, a personal reflection of her life in the dual spaces of a tourist paradise and a crime-riddled city. Having previously published modest booklets, Ang chose to offset print an edition of 800 of her 132-page book. Co-designed by Teun van der Heijden and printed in Europe, the book has received acclaim and has been listed as ‘book of the week’ on many online photobook sites, including Photoeye and Self Publish, Be Happy.

The book is contained in a lolly-pink slipcase embellished with a diamond-shape cut-out that reveals the zigzag black-and-white pattern of the book’s deeply textured cover. As the book is removed from the case the zigzag pattern becomes animated. The book’s frontispiece is the shot list for a video that can be downloaded from Ang’s website and a zine-style booklet of newspaper pages is inserted into the back of the book. The images within the volume are presented in a small number of variants including a small diamond shape on a white ground, full bleed over a double page spread, full bleed over a single page and images that flow onto a flap between two full pages. These design aspects extend the book beyond the traditional monograph and, in doing so, add to the density and power of the photobook as a communicative device.

When asked about her choice of designer for *Gold Coast*, Ying Ang commented that she chose Teun van der Heijden ‘specifically because I knew that he could help me communicate my own vision to my audience and effectively build that bridge between what is in my head and public consumption’. She acknowledges that graphic design is a ‘wholly different set of skills and field of expertise [to photography]’ and that ‘I don’t even come close to assuming that I can do the job as effectively as someone who puts just as much time into that craft as I do in mine.’¹⁸



Ying Ang, *Gold Coast*



Ying Ang, *Gold Coast*

Ying Ang, *Gold Coast*, Melbourne, published by the artist, 2014

Ultimately, a photobook's power lies in the nature and quality of its narrative, structure and photographs. Helen Frajman, director of M.33 books, believes that an experienced book designer understands the typographic aspects of visual communication in photobooks, but also 'has experience of paper stock, printing processes and how to deal with printers'.¹⁹ Dan Rule, Director of Perimeter Books, Perimeter Editions and Perimeter Distribution, contends that the designer is the 'key conduit' in the process of translating a collection of photographs into a 'readable object'. Ying Ang's partnership with Teun van der Heijden on *Gold Coast* is an example of how collaboration can offer, as Rule puts it, 'new vantages, considerations and ways of reading and understanding the work'.²⁰ This photographer/designer collaboration is becoming an ever-more necessary process in the current indie DIY paradigm; a photographer can conceptualise and create a work knowing that a designer will transform the photographs into a solid piece of visual communication in book form. As Rule has observed, 'Almost every photobook I own, or have published (or stock in Perimeter), could not exist or operate in nearly the same way without brilliant graphic design'.²¹

In conclusion

Gerry Badger and Martin Parr stated that '[i]n general, the artist's book has had much more influence upon photography than photography has had upon the artist's book ...'²² As Johanna Drucker noted, the photographic book of the 1920s was considered to be 'avant-garde, experimental, and innovative',²³ a perception driven by the influence of artists/graphic designers/photographers like László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and El Lissitzky. What would be the influence on photobooks of designers like Alexey Brodovitch and Jan Tschichold? Anne Ruyt has discussed 'the Golden Age' of Dutch photobooks in the catalogue for the 2014–15 exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum *On the Move: Storytelling in Contemporary Photography and Graphic Design*. She observes that this occurred between 1945 and 1968, a period in which photographers and graphic designers shared the same professional association.²⁴ This same connection can be seen in the 1960s, when both Ed Ruscha, a trained commercial artist, and Sol LeWitt, a trained graphic designer, were influential in their conceptual approach to photography and book design. The artists' book–graphic designer–photobook collaboration has an established pedigree.

While indie publishing produces photobooks created by the photographers themselves, the culture of the discipline is increasingly characterised by relationships between photographers and designers. Evidence of this can be seen in the prominent international photobook award events. Lesley A Martin, publisher of the Aperture Foundation book program and of *The PhotoBook Review*, acted as a judge of the annual Paris Photo–Aperture Foundation Photobook Awards in 2013. She observed that, of the 20 books shortlisted for the awards, 14 were self-published and, increasingly, 'these self-pub books are very sophisticated in their construction and the materials they use'. She added that '[p]eople are manipulating bindings, making beautiful cloth selection and doing things that you don't find in the usual factory processes'.²⁵

The photobook of the 21st century, with its historic and tangible connection with graphic design and artists' books, is nurturing the re-emergence of the photobook as a pre-eminent form of the book as art.