

The Rise of the Photobook in the Twenty-First Century

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The last decade has seen a substantial rise in interest in books containing photography – whether represented by ‘the photographic book’ or what has become increasingly and reverentially known as ‘the photobook’. The subtle yet significant differences indicated by these terms are often ignored. Nevertheless, a growing number of publications and academic scholarship have attempted to establish a history of the photobook and an accompanying canon. This has also resulted in greater attention from the art market. The photographic book defies straightforward categorisation due to the various types of publication that it can encompass. Taxonomic attempts are further complicated given that, as Elizabeth McCausland has noted, “These forms are not watertight compartments; they are fluid and intermingle.”¹

The embryonic canon that has grown up around the photobook has largely been established by survey publications, sometimes based upon specific private collections, with entries selected by collectors, dealers and scholars working independently or in collaboration. Surveys drawn from private collections, such as the two-volume *The Photobook: A History* (2004 and 2006) based on photographer Martin Parr’s collection; *Japanese photobooks of the 1960s and ‘70s* (2009) from Ryūichi Kaneko’s collection; and *Photobooks: 802 Photo Books from the M. + M. Auer Collection* (2007) run the risk of presenting a highly subjective selection of books with occasional odd omissions.² Despite often being specialists in the field, collectors’ and dealers’ relationships with the art market potentially compromise and problematise their role as primary authors of the history of the photobook.

The term ‘photobook’ has increasingly been applied to various publications created in diverse circumstances, from a range of political, social and aesthetic viewpoints, resulting in the misleading homogenisation of a vast swathe of published photographic material. In addition, the term ‘photobook’ typically defines a book created to fulfil a primarily artistic function, but is often applied to publications that are non-artistic in origin in order to increase the book’s authority and value within the market. The ‘photobook’ label is increasingly used to designate a book’s aesthetic and market value to the exclusion of all other types of worth. This obscures individual books’ historical, cultural and ideological origins, obstructing our ability to assess the photographic book’s nature and value. Shaune Lakin draws attention to the lack of critical and academic work in this area, commenting that, “The paucity of critical literature on the photographic book, relative to its prevalence in photographic history,

belies the significance that has been attributed to it.”³ While Lakin mentions a few critical attempts to delineate the history and form of the photographic book, this area remains ripe for further critical and academic engagement. Scholarship will become increasingly important in order to justify the photobook’s often idiosyncratic emergent canon, and will enable under-examined individual works to be studied in-depth.

Books have been repositories for the photographic image since the invention of the paper-based photograph. The mass-produced photographic book was made possible by the development of print technology that enabled the inexpensive and efficient reproduction of photographic imagery. However, the popular availability that mass production engendered has given way to elitism and scarcity due to the art market’s commodification of the photobook. The book is perhaps the most effective vehicle through which to present and disseminate a body of photographic work: its life extends beyond that of an exhibition (or a photographer); it is easily portable; and its contents retain the potential for rediscovery.

Photography as a Fine Art in the West is predicated upon single masterpiece images, one of the primary factors behind what Lakin calls the “pervasive but only partially seen presence” of the book within the history of photography.⁴ However, photographic books have significantly aided the acceptance of photography as an art form and the establishment of many photographic careers. Walker Evans’s *American Pictures* (1938), William Klein’s *Life Is Good and Good for you in New York: trance witness reveals* (1956) and Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958) brought the photographers to prominence and substantiate Gerry Badger’s assertion that, “In the photobook, the sum, by definition, is greater than the parts, and the greater the parts, the greater the potential of the sum.”⁵ These examples demonstrate the potential of photographic books created through judicious selection and juxtaposition of images (and image and text), combined with thoughtful layout and design. Nineteenth-century albums, which were carefully organised to display their photographs to best advantage through imaginative image juxtaposition and narrative, presage some successful photobooks’ characteristic qualities.

‘Photobook’ is a literal contraction of ‘photographic book’, which is often how the term is understood. However, its contemporary usage is more nebulous. According to Badger in *The Photobook*, the most influential and widely dissimilated text on this type of publication,

A photobook is a book – with or without text – where the work’s primary message is carried by photographs. It is a book authored by a photographer or by someone editing and sequencing the work of a photographer, or even a number of photographers. It has a specific character, distinct from the photographic print...⁶

This straightforward definition fails to encapsulate the nuanced nature of the publications that are the primary focus of *The Photobook*. Badger goes on to define this area of concentration to be “a specific kind of photobook” produced by an auteur creator, who produces a work “according to his or her own artistic vision”, and who treats the photobook “as an important form in its own right.”⁷ Moreover, the entries included in *The Photobook* have to demonstrate “that something more ambitious than the commonplace photographically illustrated book has been attempted, or in certain cases, achieved without any self-conscious attempt being made.”⁸ The complex, multifaceted character of Badger’s definition of the photobook, and his assertion that these criteria can be fulfilled without the producer being ‘conscious’ of it creates both a very broad basis (essential, as *The Photobook’s* two volumes include over 400 entries) and a confusing, potentially contradictory definition. Ralph Prins provides the most concise, coherent and easily applicable definition of the photobook, which Badger also quotes in *The Photobook*: “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.”⁹ Prins’s definition encapsulates the salient features of most definitions of the photobook.

According to the explanation proffered by *The Photobook*, relatively few nineteenth century publications should be categorised as photobooks. One exception is Julia Margaret Cameron’s two-volume publication that photographically illustrates Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1875). Cameron’s photographs express her personal artistic agenda and are as crucial to the publication as the poems that inspired them. Many early photographic books are regularly designated ‘photobooks’ because they contain photographs that are celebrated for their artistic brilliance, but were originally produced as illustrations to now disregarded texts, such as Anna Atkins’s algae specimen cyanotypes or James Nasmyth and James Carpenter’s photographs that purport to be of the moon. The beauty of these books’ image content has sustained contemporary interest, but by strict definition both publications should be categorised as photographic or photographically illustrated books, as neither the books nor the images were intended to be art. A similar issue arises in Badger’s discussion of Dr Hans Killian’s *Facies Dolorosa* (1938) in *The Photobook*, “Although it was simply motivated by a doctor’s desire to record the symptoms of his patients, it crossed the boundary from science into art.”¹⁰ Retrospectively projected contemporary conceptions of art often obscure the historically specific origins and intent behind a work’s creation. While general surveys of the photobook present subjective selections within their pages, it is crucial that scholarship assesses and challenges current assumptions and categorisations of this kind.

The Truthful Lens: A Survey of the Photographically Illustrated Book 1844-1914 (1980) is a precursor and useful counterpoint to many recent surveys that use the term 'photobook' to indicate a certain level of visual artistry, exhibited through the images or layout, in photographic books.¹¹ The use of 'photographically illustrated book' within *The Truthful Lens* demonstrates that, within this publication, each photographically illustrated book's image content is considered separately from any text, and sustains its own independent meaning. *The Truthful Lens* promotes as broad a definition of 'photographically illustrated book' as *The Photobook* does of 'photobook', and as a result many entries overlap. Within the bounds of their definitions of terms, *The Truthful Lens* and *The Photobook* are correct in their classifications. A change of categorisation does not necessarily indicate a value judgement regarding the artistic merit of the photographs, the photographer's achievement or book as a whole; rather, a more exacting taxonomy may better illuminate the development of the relationship between the photograph and the book in all its forms. Parr comments that, "There is no scholarly consensus as to exactly what books are out there, and no comprehensive listing of the world's most important photographic books."¹² There is also no authoritative definition of the terms 'photobook' or 'photographic book': a consensus has yet to be reached, and books will be classified and re-classified as this area develops.

Rare book dealer and gallerist Andrew Roth's *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (2001) marked the initial rekindling of recent interest in the photobook, although both this book and Roth's related publication *The Open Book* (2004) describe the surveyed contents as 'photographic books' rather than 'photobooks'.¹³ The former term potentially encompasses any type of book containing photographic material, from amateur albums to published books, irrespective of the material's original purpose or artistic intent. However, Roth's definition of 'photographic book' is more circumscribed: "the book had to integrate both its physical and conceptual qualities into a beautiful object; and ... be historically linked to map a global continuity."¹⁴ Roth's definition enables the inclusion of books designed for a variety of purposes, including those from the nineteenth century, while also insisting upon a level of artistry expressed by the object, not just through image content. The intent behind a chosen publication's original production is inconsequential – something that often becomes problematic when nineteenth-century books are designated 'photobooks'. Roth's insistence that his entries are historically contextualised helps to establish the individual photographic book's, and his selection's, significance and authority.

The Book of 101 Books, *The Open Book*, *The Photobook* and *Japanese photobooks* reflect a similar model in their design and layout. All aim to present a standardised taxonomy of books within their pages. Each entry consists of a reproduction of at least one double-page spread from the photographic book in

question, alongside an image of the book's cover, emphasising the materiality of the book as an object. In publications based on private collections there is a sense in which these images of individual books, which often exhibit signs of wear, are a collector's visual statement of ownership. This taxonomic style of presentation also reinforces the conception that some of these survey books could be used as buyer's guides – simultaneously satiating and feeding the popular demand for the photobook. The status of the photographic book as a collector's item is almost an inevitable component of books about the photobook, reflecting the preoccupations of many of those responsible for making these selections. Collecting may encourage connoisseurship and vice versa, but the link between these books and the art market is often explicit.

As many contemporary survey publications are overtly subjective, they present themselves as preliminary attempts to establish a canon and history of the photographic book. But they are often not utilised as such. Pierre Bergé & Associés's November 2009 photographic literature auction catalogue noted the recent survey publications in which individual items to be auctioned had been included. The catalogue text expressed a highly generalised understanding of 'the photobook', stating that:

In the past 20, 30 years [sic], photobooks not only gained in popularity, but we could also see more and more creative persons expressing themselves in making photobooks. Books with a great diversity in form, or design, style of photographs etc, all considered as photobooks, which one could roughly define as books using the photographic image in all its possibilities.¹⁵

This vague, all-inclusive definition reinforces the concept that the photobook is directly linked to an artistic or creative mindset, conferring the status of art on the photographic literature to be auctioned – a useful sales tactic to appeal to an art-focused clientele.

Sales of photography have been extremely buoyant in recent times, but only a finite number of vintage prints are available for purchase. Many photographers produced photographic books or worked for mass media publications. As prices for photographs continue to rise, the market has inevitably looked at the saleability of this material. Photobooks may never be worth the equivalent of a rare vintage print, but prices have leapt in the last fifteen years. As curator Ute Eskildsen predicted, "Just as the value of photography on the art market has increased dramatically, so too will the photographic book become a collector's item."¹⁶ Paul Strand's photobook *Un paese* cost \$7.50 US upon its release in 1955. First editions of the book now sell for between \$600 and \$3,500 US.¹⁷ Forthcoming research by the author of this article will add to the academic literature surrounding Strand's photobooks, reinforcing their

significance within his body of work and may also further inflate their price. The current appetite for the photobook is also indicated by the prices fetched for first edition books about the photographic book. *The Truthful Lens*, issued in an 1,000 copy limited edition, has become a collectable photographically illustrated book in its own right. *The Book of 101 Books* was released in three editions: a trade cloth edition, a limited edition of 500 and a deluxe leather-bound edition of 101.¹⁸ The trade edition, originally priced at \$85 US, is now available for \$450 US, while a deluxe edition is sold for \$2,100 US.¹⁹ Even auction catalogues can become a collectable commodity: *Pluk* photography magazine noted on the event of the first British auction of rare photobooks in 2006 that, “the Christies catalogue itself will surely become collectible.”²⁰

Tracking down rare or valuable photographic publications in a public institutional context can be challenging, as many books (even those originally mechanically produced in large numbers) have entered private collections and are no longer easily accessible. While many historic photobooks are now dispiritingly out of reach, contemporary survey publications often promote the purchase of photographic books as a way to encounter new photographic work, to support talented photographers and to make a potentially valuable investment. Although quality varies, a great number of new photobooks are produced every year and excellent original material is available. Increased interest in the photobook has also prompted publishers to reissue classic volumes, again making available books that were often originally intended for popular mass circulation.

Darius Himes has noted contemporary photographic practitioners’ continued interest in creating photographic books, but this raises some questions about the form:

‘I want a book of my photographs’ is on the lips of nearly every photographer I speak with, but few have more than a tentative grasp of the component parts of a book or an understanding of what they want to express in book form – of why *this* body of work needs to be seen in book form as opposed to on the gallery wall or in a magazine.²¹

The issues raised by Himes were as pertinent to past generations as to this one. Further study in this area not only supports research into historical photographic publications but also has the potential to nurture the future of the photographic book. The material qualities of the book, issues of design and layout and areas of interdisciplinary crossover, such as film and literature, are all topics that currently have been under-researched. This work would be of practical benefit to new progenitors of the photographic book. Elizabeth McCausland’s 1942 article ‘Photographic Books’ addressed the photographic book’s ideological

potential and discussed conceptual aspects alongside practical issues of design, printing and choice of paper stock. Technology has transformed this area thanks to improvements in digital media and the ability to print on demand, but there has been a surprising lack of critical engagement in light of these new developments. While reproductive methods have been revolutionised, some issues remain the same, as Himes has emphasised. Aesthetic and ideological strategies utilised by past masters of the photographic book are relevant to this debate. The photographic book is far from being consigned to history, and the critical discussion – both in terms of the photographic book’s past and future – must strive to catch up.

- 1 E. McCausland, ‘Photographic Books’ in W. D. Morgan, ed., *The Complete Photographer: a complete guide to amateur and professional photography* (New York: National Educational Alliance, 1942) 2784.
- 2 M. Parr and G. Badger, *The Photobook: A History Volume I* (London: Phaidon, 2004; reprinted 2005); M. Parr and G. Badger, *The Photobook: A History Volume II* (London: Phaidon, 2006); R. Kaneko, I. Vartanian, L. A. Martin, and K. Wada, *Japanese photobooks of the 1960s and ‘70s* (New York: Aperture, 2009); M. Auer and M. Auer, *Photobooks 802 Photo Books from the M. + M. Auer Collection* (Hermance: Editions M + M, 2007).
- 3 S. Lakin, ‘Review of *The Photobook: A History*’, *History of Photography*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Winter 2008, 383.
- 4 Lakin, ‘Review of *The Photobook*’, 383.
- 5 Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: Vol. I*, 7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 9 M. Boom and R. Prins, *Foto in omslag: het Nederlandse documentaire fotoboek na 1945 (Photography between covers: the Dutch documentary photobook after 1945)*, (Amsterdam: Fragment Uitgeverij, 1989) 12.
- 10 Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: Vol. I*, 137.
- 11 L. Goldschmidt and W. J. Naef, *The Truthful Lens: A Survey of the Photographically Illustrated Book, 1844-1914* (New York: Grolier Club, 1980).
- 12 Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: Vol. I*, 5.
- 13 A. Roth, R. Benson, V. Aletti, and D. Levi Strauss, *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (New York: PPP Editions in association with Roth Horowitz, 2001); A. Roth, *The Open Book: A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present* (Göteborg, Sweden: Hasselblad Center, 2004).
- 14 Roth, *The Open Book*, 9.
- 15 Pierre Bergé & Associés, *Livres de Photographies*, Paris, Mecredi 25 Novembre 2009, 7.
- 16 Roth, *The Open Book*, 28.
- 17 <http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Strand%2C+Paul&bi=o&bx=off&ds=30&recentlyadded=all&sortby=17&sts=t&tn=%22Un+paese%22&x=67&y=13> Accessed 27 January 2010.
- 18 D. Price, ‘Review of *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century*’, *History of Photography*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003, 250.

- 19 <http://www.abebooks.com/search/an/andrew+roth/tn/book+of+101+books>
Accessed 26 January 2010.
- 20 D. Newburg, 'Auction Report', *Pluk*, Issue 27, November/December 2005, 23.
- 21 D. Himes, 'Who Cares About Books?' <http://wordswithoutpictures.org/main.html>
Accessed 7 November 2009.