

Returning to *Another Black Darkness*

Materiality and Mattering in Photobook Encounters over Time

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ABSTRACT:

This article foregrounds a specific, memorable reading of the photobook *Another Black Darkness* by Sakiko Nomura to unravel the different socio-political agencies of objects and environments that configure how we interpret and understand photobooks, as individual creative works, and as a medium in general. It demonstrates a “methodology of encounter” that revisits an autoethnographic response written in 2018 to critique the ways that materiality, place, positionality, coincidence and time configure certain experiential knowledges that are situated in time and place. Repeat readings of the book and the original text uncover deeper analysis of these entangled affects. Photobooks are produced in multiple, and can be found in many different environments, with different rules of engagement, so it is necessary to develop a critical understanding of the medium that can account for this plurality of encounter. Through focusing on performative, relational moments of meaning-making with photobooks, the article links substance with significance, or, “matter and mattering” (Barad), and shows distinct, experiential capabilities of the photobook as an artistic form.

RESUMO:

Este artigo traz para primeiro plano uma leitura específica e baseada na memória do livro de fotografia *Another Black Darkness*, de Sakiko Nomura, de forma a desvendar as diversas agências sociopolíticas de objectos e ambientes que configuram o modo como interpretamos e compreendemos livros de fotografia enquanto trabalhos criativos individuais e enquanto *medium*. O artigo demonstra a “metodologia do encontro” que revisita uma resposta autoetnográfica escrita em 2018 para criticar os modos como materialidade, lugar, posicionamento, coincidência e tempo configuram certos conhecimentos experienciais situáveis no tempo e no espaço. Leituras repetidas do livro e do texto original revelam análises mais profundas destas diferentes questões. Os livros de fotografia são produzidos em quantidade, e podem ser encontrados em muitos ambientes distintos, com diferentes regras de compromisso, pelo que é necessário desenvolver uma compreensão crítica do *medium* que tenha em conta esta pluralidade do encontro. Focando-se em momentos performativos e relacionais de produção de sentido com os livros de fotografia, este artigo associa substância e significado, ou “matéria e importância” [matter and mattering] (Barad), e explora capacidades distintas e experienciais do livro de fotografia enquanto forma artística.

KEYWORDS:

autoethnography; library; New Materialism; Sakiko Nomura; ways of knowing

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

autoetnografia; biblioteca; formas de conhecer; Novo Materialismo; Sakiko Nomura

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1. An account of encounter: Fumbling with *Another Black Darkness* in the National Art Library

Here we are again. It caught my eye the first time I saw it. But it was too busy, too fluorescent. The book fair is so very public, I didn't feel I could get to know it properly, the way that I wanted to. So I saved myself for another time, where it's quiet; we won't be interrupted.

The plain black box slips out from its brown cardboard sleeve. The box is smart, its textured title glints at me faintly through inky black on black matte. It winks its glossy eye as I tilt it back and forth and run a light finger over small embossed letters. I open the black box and lift out a black book, darkly titled as before. A woman's face peers out from the shadowy box lining, watching me as I take up the book and turn it over in my hands. Tilt to the back, to the side, appraise its spine, its sides. Then opening, plunging in, delving into its black pages like a sudden switching off a light. My eyes squint and adjust to see the trace of an image. Human, animal forms emerge, natural forms. I lift it until the light catches the sheen of the ink on paper and the shapes become images become impressions and it tells me its secret. I am a voyeur in a darkened room: night time, animal time, where scenes of love and pain in the dimness of black on black alternate with visions of blooming flora, explosive, organic forms.

Stealing through the pages, I know this darkness, the feel of the rumpled linen, the hushed rustle of night-time. I know the touches and breaths. I catch myself sitting beside the window in the bright and decorous National Art Library, where outside children splash and shriek in the courtyard fountain, where inside nobody knows the content of these pages but me, it feels almost indecent, it's ok to put Egon Schiele on the wall for everyone to see what you're looking at, art we can all stand back and appreciate, slapped across the RA, call it daring, risqué, expressive, to some, vulgar. The photobook is performing only for me. Am I shocked? I wasn't before, when I first found this book. But here, now, in these surroundings, perhaps yes, I am a little thrilled by the contrast.

This book asks me about myself. Dares me to see my own experience in its explicit pages. Leaning towards the windowpane to throw light on the darkened erotic images, I am complicit in the act through so actively seeking to see. It is a portrait of senses not scenes, the thickness of seeing in pitch black, where touch is sight. It unfolds its sensual narrative, slowly, through its intimacy, the act of getting close to the surface of the paper, nose between the covers. The glimpses are incoherent and yet recognisable. The book gives me pleasure because its sight is hard-earned; my close attention is gratified with comprehension. As the bodies arch to their climax, so does the floral imagery blossom into familiar metaphors of verdant aromatic awakening.

I close the book and replace book in box, the box in the sleeve. I am struck by the orderliness of the packaging following the abandon between its sheets. I return it to the counter wrapped in its brown paper parcel. "One for the top shelf", I think.

My prudish blush surprises me as the librarian meets my eye. My curator-brain rejoinders, “because it is small, and light in weight and lifts with ease; small things at the top, space efficiency: that’s the sensible way to store it”. Safely returned to professional practicality.

Weeks later, at home, my own copy nestles pristine in its padded envelope. Fresh from Japan, its sultry pages have yet to give up their darkness inside.

(September 2018)

2. Framing a methodology of encounter

Photobooks today exist as diverse material entities, in equally diverse material realities. They are complex art objects capable of structuring multi-layered seeing and reading experiences. They are also produced in multiple, with each copy going out into the world, to be found in a different place, where it acquires a biography of its own. Each copy facilitates repeat readings — multiple, mutable, personal encounters over time and space. The opening passage to this article narrates one such encounter with *Another Black Darkness* by Sakiko Nomura (2016) in the National Art Library (NAL) at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, in 2018. It was written from detailed diaristic notes made during that particular experience of reading the book.

In what follows, I introduce a “methodology of encounter” that critiques the initial creative response to articulate a relationship between the materiality of photobooks, the materiality of the environments in which we find them, and the meanings that emerge, or come to “matter” through these situated encounters, in order to emphasise the importance of personal and contextual meaning-making in the growing arena of photobook discourse. The analysis was constructed from repeated responses to the original text in 2019, 2020 and 2022. Over several years, each time I returned to the text and the photobook (which I had since purchased), new impressions entangled with prior responses, enhancing or complicating my understanding of this photobook, of photobooks in general, and of my self. Following an explanation of the methodology’s theoretical foundation, the next section of the article will examine more-than-human agencies of the encounter with *Another Black Darkness* through themes of materiality, place, the reader’s identity, coincidence and time. The essay concludes by reflecting on the ways that the iterative methodology of encounter contributes to understandings about how the photobook matters, materially and discursively, as a distinct creative form.

The methodology of encounter was developed through my doctoral research, through a framework of New Materialist theory, phenomenology and feminist praxis. It has emerged non-innocently through my situated, embodied positionality as a woman writing in, what remains for the time being, a male-dominated field. I desired to explore “touchy-feely”, affective and multi-sensory aspects of photobook experiences, which veers into languages of subjectivity and emotion that have historically been gendered as feminine and devalued in scholarship. I was frustrated

by publications and definitions that attempted to fix or categorise what a photobook *is*, which I perceived as aligned with the imperialist (also, racist and sexist) epistemological agenda that has prevailed since the Enlightenment era. I sought instead to understand photobooks more through the relational ways they perform — what they *do* — as a more ethical and less hierarchical mode of exploring how materiality and embodiment factor into forming knowledges about photobooks. This invites greater scope for understanding the photobook from a perspective of individual, relational ontologies: it acknowledges photobooks perform differently, whether due to physical properties and artistic capabilities, as identified by Jörg Colberg, or the context of their use and reception.

My methodology to find different ways of learning and knowing has manifested as interwoven voices from multiple writing acts that collapse together temporalities. It is a sustained, deliberate experimentation that has been necessary to my effort to explain the phenomena of co-construction and interrelationships between consumers of art and culture and artefacts themselves, and learning how meaning is co-constituted through these complex relations. Feminist scholars of affect (including Kathleen Stewart, Lauren Berlant, Marisol de la Cadena and Monica Huerta) demonstrate how the personal and political collide through their felt descriptions of ordinary events and images, and how these can be assembled to reveal more about the histories and tensions that surround us.

In this study, these accounts combine with New Materialism's attention to posthuman or "more-than-human" agency to form a political and ethical framework to access the nuances of how material and social worlds interrelate. According to Bennett, agency and affect issue forth in interactions between entities, highlighting the importance of more-than-human situational factors in a temporary "political ecology of things" (Bennett, 2010: xiii). Agency is enacted in performative comings-together of entities, whose physical properties and/or symbolic value mediate knowledges or actions (Bennett, 2010; Law, 2002; Latour, 2005). Photobooks, texts, environments and other non-human entities can have agency that is neither limited to what people think and do with them, nor contained within determinate conceptualisations of what is "human" and what is "object". New Materialist philosophies recognise terms like "person" or "photobook", "subject" and "object", do not denote essential categories, but impermanent, discursive groupings of different kinds of matter that co-constitute meaning through their relation to one another (Barad, 2003: 810). This queering of boundaries aligns with feminist critique through the assertion that things can only be known relationally, through situated, contingent moments of encounter (Barad, 2011).

This discourse has much to offer the interactive medium of the photobook. The interrelated, temporary sense of agency helps us think about how phenomena configure the personal and political meanings we make through encounters with photobooks. To access this experiential detail, I draw on phenomenology, which studies how we experience and interpret being the world. Phenomenology is primarily anthropocentric, which means it has inherent contradictions with the concept of posthumanism, and poses a challenge to my methodology of using a subjective account to examine more-than-human agency. However, I argue these philosophies share the productive view that boundaries between the self and the

material world are imprecise cognitive constructions. How we perceive and make meaning with material things in space and time is something that is continually re-configured, articulated by Karen Barad as the “mattering” that threads throughout this essay (2007: 147-152).

The methodology of encounter uses autoethnographic writing to trace emergent phenomenological knowledges about the more-than-human agency of photobooks and other entities. Criticisms of autoethnography as a method for valorising the self can be offset through a more-than-human perspective, which challenges notions of intentional agency and bounded selfhood. In the short scope of this article, it feels sufficient to acknowledge there are advantages and limitations to this complex theoretical foundation without going into the intricacies of how the concepts are reconciled. Nevertheless, philosophical discourses such as these offer exciting new paradigms for progressing beyond anthropocentric, hierarchical structuring of things, to which the next section will now turn.

3. Critiquing the encounter

3.1 Materiality

“...opening, plunging in, delving into its black pages like a sudden switching off a light... I lift it until the light catches the sheen of the ink on paper and the shapes become images become impressions and it tells me its secret”

Another Black Darkness reimagines imagery from Nomura’s earlier book *Black Darkness* (2008). Solarised versions of the photographs are printed in an unusual combination of black ink on black paper, in a limited edition of 600. I had first seen another copy at Offprint book fair in May 2017 (“*it was too busy, too fluorescent. The book fair is so very public*”) and been intrigued by its materials: black on black, with a smooth, matte surface that looked as though it would show every smudge and scuff. By eye alone, I could imagine the texture of the object, how it would feel, and the gentle touch that would keep it pristine. Architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa has observed that “vision reveals what touch already knows. [...] Our eyes stroke distant surfaces [...] and the unconscious tactile sensation determines the agreeableness or unpleasantness of the experience” (2005: 42). The materially-complex form of the photobook engages synaesthetic and embodied knowledges before we even reach to pick it up — it inspire an unconscious impulse to reach out.

Another Black Darkness comes in a black box inside a plain brown cardboard slipcase. It is a sexy book — visually and materially. Before reaching the book, the reader navigates a sequence of openings and undressings — sliding out of one outer layer, prising open another. This alluring design and densely black materiality has a transformative artistic effect on Nomura’s intimate imagery of nudes, cityscapes and still lifes, mostly flowers. The solarised photographs, printed sparingly in black, leave such little visual information that while I’m still not completely sure whether any of them explicitly depict sexual acts, the black, dark space has a dense erotic charge. In my prose response, the materiality of the book had agency in affecting my embodied response because I had to physically move the book and contort my body

to see pages that, ultimately, denied me complete knowledge of the images. The construction thus invited the response of active physical engagement, fostering a closer sensual link of voyeurism and frustration between the book and myself.

“The photobook is performing only for me”

The majority of photobooks are not simply made to exist: they desire engagement of some kind. The book is a fickle form of object, because superficial structural commonalities — spine, a head, a tail, front and back cover — can smooth over a variety of purposes. What appears to be a book-type thing *becomes* a photobook through interaction with a reader, as they gain insight into its image content. In this way, photobooks align with a performance that requires co-operation of a reading body to be activated and fully realised. This co-operation, in the encounter with *Another Black Darkness*, becomes “complicity” as my exaggerated movements, prompted by the book’s materiality, combine with the contents to charge the encounter with voyeuristic affect.

We engage with books in time and space and we come to know them through perceptual, hermeneutic, unfolding experience (Heidegger, 1978; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). To interact with books, often we use our hands and our bodies as much as our eyes: the book becomes incorporated into the perceiving subject. Marshall McLuhan saw media technologies as extensions of ourselves, through being materially, socially, and integrated with our psychic and nervous systems. This blurring of subject and object occurs with the photobook in perception and materiality. A reader extends intentional consciousness towards the thing that becomes joined with their physical activity of looking. At the same time, there is no separate physical sensation that differentiates where one carbon-based body ends and the other begins, as I lean into the table and the book leans into my hands; for that moment, we perform as one lump of looking matter.

And yet, at the same time, the book is not *only* performing with me, for me. The object of *Another Black Darkness* compared to the earlier *Black Darkness* results from new collaboration, at a different point in time. Nomura created both photobooks with designer Satoshi Machiguchi and publisher Akio Nagasawa, so making the later one restages and reperforms social and professional relationships. In this way, *Another Black Darkness* materialises an art world network of practitioners, photographic methods and printing technologies, all with their own histories, with which the reader comes into contact through each encounter (Becker, 2008).

Thinking through a photobook encounter in more-than-human terms repositions it as a temporary, relational exchange between different entities, rather than an essentially human experience. The concept that things can have agency subverts conventional Western anthropocentric ontologies of subject and object by asserting that “people could not be truly social, or even human, without things: objects structure social interactions, and enable many of the activities that make us human, such as writing, thinking, trading, and so on” (Oyen, 2018: 4), meaning the social and material worlds are not cleanly divided, and we form discursive understanding of what it means to be human in opposition to othered, non-human objects. Photobooks offer a useful object to experiment with these posthuman

epistemologies that have meaningful philosophical implications for understanding our place in the contemporary world.

“*One for the top shelf...*”

When I first approached *Another Black Darkness*, I found nothing remarkable about the brown cardboard slipcase. The materiality had made me participate and labour to look at the nudes and sexual imagery it contained. As I repackaged the book, the combined affect of my reading experience and the cardboard formed an association with relating to other popular culture resonances such as the brown paper wrappings that (before my time) would shield innocent eyes from pornographic magazines in newsagents. Tate Shaw has described material-semiotic association in reading visual books as a “closure”:

complementing language and imagery with materials and printing [...] brings a kind of physical veracity to a work. [...] If you’re reading something, you’re identifying, and processing, and forming understanding beyond it, physically. [...] Looking at a sequence of images in a book... you form a closure between the images through cognitive binding and memory. (Shaw, 2016: 102)

In this case, materiality, images, recent embodied experience, a mildly cringing sensation I recognised as embarrassment or prudishness, remembered discourse and specific material culture “bound” together to produce the image of the “top shelf”.

But, as my “curator-brain” interrupted this association, the book’s materiality also had agency in its handling and care, because the physicality of its dimensions would determine the most practical mode of storage. On this first, earlier, book fair encounter, I was struck by *Another Black Darkness*’s unusual objecthood, which I felt restricted from handling because of the busy book fair, and a fear of damaging the pricey product. On the second encounter, in the NAL, I could dive into the imagery, but I also noted a very neat, barely visible pencilled number of the library’s shelfmark. The NAL’s copy of *Another Black Darkness* is in the special collections — had it been in the general collections, its identifying marks would be more visible. On the third encounter, with a third copy, at home, I noticed the precise folds that hinged the black slip case, and felt still more need to keep the book nestled in bubble wrap now it was my own possession. In this way, although different copies are created virtually identical, save for the silver-inked edition number, they accrue layers of ontological meaning depending on how they are materially used and valued. The combined factors that position one copy as commodity for sale, another as museum object, and a third as a treasured possession have agency in configuring how each photobook called *Another Black Darkness* comes to matter for different readers and organisations.

3.2 Place

“the bright and decorous National Art Library”

The material affect of the book in the NAL encounter was heightened by the incongruence of the erotic content and library scenario. In 2019, I wrote:

Once sat in the mahogany-clad National Art Library, surrounded by fellow readers studying their books and laptops intently and a soundtrack of children’s squeals of innocent delight, I had a highly embodied response to my encounter with the book in this particular situation. Despite its grandeur, the NAL is somewhere I feel comfortable now. Though the librarians are keeping a vague eye on you, you’re hardly being observed as most people are equally consumed by their own work. Yet, my position, my knowledge of photography and my familiarity with the environment, as well as my being experienced and mature enough not to be shocked or giggle like a teenager, were counteracted by the affect of the book itself as it drew me into its dark colouring and intimate imagery.

This passage draws attention to the access and regulation of affective sites where photobook encounters can happen. Each photobook exists in the real, politicised world, and access to creative objects of this kind is not equal. As Margaret Wetherell has noted, through “ordinary affect, people engage with the momentous and the global political” (2012: 7): situated affective, material experiences relate to larger societal structures or histories. While many sites such as libraries are free, users require sufficient cultural capital to know how to access them, as well as capital in the form of appearance (including race and dis/ability) to feel welcome and able to enter them. Museums and libraries are a productive site for considering composite spatial and social influences of environments because they are consciously planned and organised. Carol Duncan identifies how museums create architectural and biopolitical epistemologies that predispose “civilising” behaviours in visitors through how space is organised and “the visual, rhetorical and monumental characteristics of museum buildings and displays” (cf. Whitehead, 2012: 4).

The NAL is a double-height library, with floor-to-ceiling windows and wood panelling, stiff leather-seated chairs, large chandeliers and a balcony complete with sliding steps like Belle swings around on in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). It’s chilly, even in summer, and your footsteps ring out on the wooden floors amidst readers’ silent study. These architectural and experiential strategies confer behavioural values, with which visitors comply through self-regulation — such as, feeling “guilty” taking a photo in a gallery knowing photography is not permitted. In the NAL, the rules of engagement with photobooks are made explicit when librarians issue your books. Readers are disciplined to follow these rules by the historic, quiet environment, the desk with library staff, and the sign-in process with the guard at the door (Foucault, 1991).

Carol Duncan has explained how “the ritual character of the museum experience” enacted by physical and social environments alters our mental state as well as behaviour: “[l]ike most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention — in this case, for contemplation and learning” (1995: 8). According to Duncan, the ritual character fulfils essential activities of art museums by reinforcing the sovereignty of the

institution and its knowledge claims (1995: 7, 9). It contributes to social construction of art through framing objects with quasi-religious connotations, whilst “civilising” the behaviours of visitors by imposing scripted rituals of museum-going. *Another Black Darkness* book demanded my physical participation in ways that visibly contradicted these scripts, making odd and conspicuous shapes by craning my arms and neck. The library’s history and architectural style embody outdated moral codes about gender, sex and sexuality that contravened how I was looking, and what I was looking at, creating a dissonance that was felt as self-consciousness.

Against such a backdrop of “civilisation”, it is not surprising that looking at pictures of a sexual nature, albeit subtle ones, added a frisson to this encounter. Nomura recounted in an online interview, “Someone once told me that he reads my book in bed, which made me feel very excited. The book then becomes the secret relationship I have with my audience” (Nomura, n.d.). I doubt a private bedroom encounter with *Another Black Darkness* would be as complicated as my public and professional one.

3.3 Positionality and subjectivity

“This book asks me about myself. Dares me to see my own experience in its explicit pages.”

The discussion of subjectivity in a posthuman context is a conflicted one that I have questioned at greater length elsewhere (Carlin, 2022: 141-2, 249). It is nevertheless entangled in understanding how photobooks are handled and read by individuals, because we are positioned in living bodies that feel and inhabit the world in different intersecting ways (Crenshaw, 1995; Hills Collins, 2019; Butler, 2011). In this article, I’m not using subjectivity to signify some individual human understanding, but rather an embodied frame of relational understanding that varies from situated interaction to the next. This follows Haraway’s view that subjectivity is a fiction constructed relationally through the ways bodies interact with the social and material worlds they are embedded in.

In this encounter, I understand my subjectivity as something arising through material-discursive interaction with the book, as I become aware of how my own response might differentiate from others’ in a negotiation between book, body and experience. Not all bodies, for example, have the same physical or visual capabilities as my own body, so some people would experience *Another Black Darkness* differently. I am a white European, able bodied, heterosexual cisgender woman. My positionality is likely to be different to that of the Japanese artist, subjects, designer, publisher and binders involved in the book’s production. The book is an English language, left-to-right codex, the materiality of which points to a Euro-centric international market. Acknowledge these cultural contexts of production and reception is pertinent for resisting tropes of orientalism and the exoticisation of cultural others (Said, 2003; Hagiwara, 2010).

In addition to this, I’m a precarious worker on a low salary, which impacts the relative expense of purchasing of a photobook for me versus collectors with greater financial security. I rent my home, and have moved four times in the past four years,

so my capacity to own books is limited by my capacity to store and inevitably relocate them. However, I have worked in museums, and feel confident in accessing books I do not own in the rarefied spaces of art libraries, and I'm probably more likely to spend money on art objects than people without this cultural habitus (Bourdieu). These biographical details influence how I relate to owning photobooks; as Pearce has observed, ownership factors significantly into the value people attribute to objects, and the bonds they develop with them (2010: xv).

Beyond blunt sociological rationale, my subjective response to reading *Another Black Darkness* is complicated by embodied recognition and personal lived experience. The blackened space within the book elicited sense-memories of fumbling and feeling around in darkened spaces, from which the images triggered a sense of self-knowledge of my own sexual experience, that I felt I identified what was represented in the obscured pictures. I relate this to what 18th century philosopher George Berkley called "haptic memory", which describes an unconscious dependence between multi-sensory perception and lived experience. An encounter with a photobook is therefore a manually interactive, multi-sensory, subjective phenomenon with a feeling, social body. How we make meaning from these perceptions is located somewhere in the entanglement of affect and discourse (Wetherell, 2012). My 2019 notes continued:

It was peculiar to have such personal recollections whilst wearing a work lanyard – separation of personal and professional. I didn't feel embarrassed as such; it's perfectly acceptable to look at art, even erotic art, in the National *Art* Library, and as assistant curator in that institution, looking at a book set aside for me by another curator, I was hardly doing anything illicit.

It becomes apparent that the incongruence between the NAL and a sexy book was also complicated by professional status (I worked as Assistant Curator of Photographs at the V&A until earlier that year). The acknowledgement or performance of sexuality in the workplace have historically been suppressed, which Vicky Schultz has linked to employee behaviours of self-regulation and self-censorship. This is based on historic conceptions of sexuality as irrational and unproductive. The myth that valorises rationality over feeling, is rooted in the same positivist, imperialist and patriarchal paradigms that organised the creation of museums like the V&A.

The discord created by a performance of sexuality and gender in the library reveals much about the patriarchal structures of power that marginalise behaviours coded as feminine, such as overt displays of emotion. This is paralleled in academic scholarship, whereby language that expresses subjective or embodied experience has historically been feminised through association with emotion (Jaggar; Anderson; Butler), whereas objective, passive language is associated with patriarchal authority and reduced individual accountability (Lakoff, 1973; Besnier, 1990). These associations result from socialised and socialising norms and gender scripts that become internalised, inscribed on the body and performed, as theorised by many feminist scholars, notably Judith Butler.

The absence of sensuous practices in Western cultural appreciation and scholarship is further engaged in intersectional linguistic politics (Ahmed, 2004;

Campt, 2017). In studies of sense and affect in non-Western cultures, no separate sense has dominance, unlike the visual hegemony typical to Western culture since the Renaissance. Pluralistic modes of interpretation have been marginalised by the typical occularcentrism and objectivism of European scholarship for centuries, epitomised in the “look but don’t touch” regulation of the museum (Gell, 1998; Gosden and Knowles, 2001; Howes, 2005; Classen, 2007; Candlin, 2009). Returning to hitherto subjugated multi-sensory subjectivity and alternative modes of description aligns with post-colonialist critique (Fanon, 1986; Césaire, 2000), therefore engaging profoundly with the sensory, emotional, and subjective experience of a photobook encounter reflects the openness and multiplicity of post-colonial ethics and forms a gesture of resistance to these entrenched knowledge cultures.

3.4 Configuring coincidence

“it’s ok to put Egon Schiele on the wall ... slapped across the RA”

There was, at the time of writing in 2018, a forthcoming exhibition of Egon Schiele at the Royal Academy being advertised around the South Kensington tube station by the V&A. I likely saw the posters that day because I remember thinking of this artist’s sexually-charged portraits as I sat, self-consciously reading in the NAL. There had also been a curious-sounding exhibition around that time comparing Schiele and Francesca Woodman at Tate Liverpool. Perhaps I contrived half a homonym between “RA” and “arse” to convey the complicated, instant affront I felt looking at some works by Schiele, compared to the gradual, sucking in seduction of this book that unfolded hermeneutically the longer I engaged with it. My recollection was that the portrayal of sexuality in this book was voluptuous and sensual, unlike Schiele’s spiky, tense, contorted figures; the material construction of *Another Black Darkness* obscures sexual acts and intersperses them amongst floral imagery in a way that replaces objectification with poetic allusion. Bodies are sensed through glimpses of navel here, an eye there, a curve that could be buttock, breast or pillow. The book evokes sensation as much as sex.

Although the reference point of Schiele may have been incidental, it inspired some art historical assemblage on my part. Sakiko Nomura formerly worked as assistant to Nobuyoshi Araki. At the time, I felt the portrayal of sex in Schiele’s work was not dissimilar from Araki’s: I saw women’s bodies distorted through expressive foreshortening, fetishized and bound, passive, bent over or legs apart; their faces gazed out with coyness or detachment, resigned to their objectification. Hiroko Hagiwara (2010) has noted that viewers of Araki’s later photographs of women, most often encountered in photobooks, are encouraged towards readings of “sexual excess and sexual desolation”, a binary that either way expresses an objectification of female form by a male gaze. Nomura’s nudes, men and women, are not seen completely enough to be objectified; too elusive to be firmly fixed in a voyeur’s gaze. The soft glimpses felt through the black pages are of lovers so actively absorbed in pleasure that the book does not suggest spectacle but rather a desire to share in their

intimacy. The suggestive bodies in Nomura’s work are partially seen, but more fully represented as sensual beings.

I could construct my comparison between this book, Araki and my spontaneous recollection of Schiele into a visual analysis about gaze, women’s bodies, or maybe how the artists’ biographies influenced their portrayals of sex, perhaps seeking some pseudo-psychoanalytical subtext. There is a latent, tempting critique of the patriarchal narrative of famous (male) photographer influencing the (female) assistant/protégée, and a desire to contradict the “great man” theory of art production that attributes key moments in history and cultural production to a singular, usually powerful, male, creator figure (Barthes, 1977). Instead, writing about the photobook in this alternative way enables me to reflect more profoundly upon my encounter(s), tease out moments where connections were made and inspect them for assumptions and coincidences, down to a mundane meeting with tube advertising.

This kind of enquiry counteracts the positivist impulse in art historical writing to connect artists and their works to a lineage of creators and influences (Panofsky, 1939; Ventrella, 2017: 203). In general, photobook anthologies and criticism have supported this historiography, which can present a causal, deterministic view of the development of a medium, through prioritising the artist’s biography, title and representational content of the photobook. This mode of enquiry also embodies the aforementioned European epistemologies since the early Modern era to polish out what is messy in favour of a clear, ‘scientific’ explanation.

In recent decades, however, art writers authors have critiqued the objectivist paradigm that characterised art history until the postmodern period through reintroducing discourses of affect and personal experience of artworks, offsetting the hegemony of a singular authoritative voice and blurring practices of criticism and ekphrasis (e.g., Fer, 2004; Grant, 2012; Rich, 1993). The non-hierarchical and networked view of discourses such as New Materialism offer additional resistance to these paradigms, because dominant narratives about the artist or subject matter can be pluralised with wider research into the multiple agents in each photobook’s art world: for example, the input of the designer is often under-discussed (Berghmans, 2013). I’ve had many fascinating conversations about the happy accidents and serendipitous meetings that enrich process of making and appreciating photobooks, which expand the ways of knowing this enigmatic medium.

3.5 Time

“Here we are again”

Over the years, I have handled *Another Black Darkness* many times as a book-object. I have also encountered it as an idea, a conversation topic, a catalogue record, images on booksellers’ websites, and a video with disembodied hands turning its pages. Most frequently, I revisited it through writing about it. Each of these encounters — physical, virtual, imagined, remembered — has an affective texture that is more or less memorable. They have all occurred at some point in time and place.

Another Black Darkness is a photobook that rewards time spent with it: to really “see” it you have to put effort in, with your eyes, mind and body, and dwell with the inky shapes on black paper until they form recognisable shapes. As seen, touching and turning pages accumulates into an evocative multi-sensory experience greater than the sum of its physical parts. Alex Sweetman has described artists’ book and photobook genres as a “time-based” medium (1986: 202), because of this unfolding, ephemeral engagement. “Time based” artforms like moving image require time and accumulating perception. To view the photobook as a time-based medium conveys the challenge that every aspect and page cannot be seen simultaneously. If borrowed or viewed in a collection, the reader “might only have the embodied experience of the book once in her lifetime” (Shaw, 2016: 63). In the photobook, or “photobookwork” as Sweetman terms it, “[e]vents occur, stories unfold, things are shown and said; through the progression of the construct, we view the conditions of being in the world, the flow of time as experience” (1986: 187).

There is a hermeneutic condition to looking at photobooks: this phenomenological term expresses how our experience, interpretation and understanding of the world around us constantly inform each other. This accumulative apprehension describes *knowing* as a perspectival process of discovery, like a torch’s beam of light (Heidegger, 1978). For some perceptions to be revealed, what is outside the beam is necessarily concealed. With each angled view, the bearer acquires a more complete mental picture of their surroundings. As people interact with photobooks, they see them in sequential “torchlight” moments of encounter, when information on one page informs the interpretation of the next, and the experience of one photobook can inform another.

Even after a physical photobook encounter ends, the perception of that encounter continues to be hermeneutically reformulated in the reader’s mind and memory — just as *Another Black Darkness* played on my mind after seeing it at Offprint, leading me to request it in the NAL, and ultimately inspiring this research. Should a reader come into contact with the book again, whether physically or in reference, this may alter their perception of the original encounter, as I have mythologised my own photobooks encounters through autoethnographic reflection. To cite Michel de Certeau, “[t]he readable transforms itself into the memorable;... the viewer reads the landscape of his childhood in the evening news” (1988: xxi). This means that our former life experiences are continually reinterpreted alongside new experiences, and new media we engage with are continually perceived and interpreted according to what we have previously lived and understood.

Repeat readings with the same photobook entangle new experiences with old. Through certain evocative objects, we commune with our past selves, those former, formative moments we have also spent holding them, as well as the histories of others embodied within them, prompting new insights and continued discussion (Turkle, 2011; Auslander, 2017). These encounters do not operate in chronologies of “before” and “after”. They happen, and their impressions jostle together: for example, in experiencing *Another Black Darkness* in another present, it is evening and I’m writing by the light of a single desk lamp, noticing how the book behaves differently in this light. I am also connecting with encounters past, as I remember how it looked in bright daylight, next to the window in a university office. Beyond my own

engagements *with* the photobook, I can relate *through* the photobook to those deferred moments of life folded into it by its creator(s), such as the time a woman sat up in a bed, wrapped in a sheet, and arrested the photographer with her gaze, the many walks Nomura took with her camera, or moments of inspiration in darkrooms and meetings. Thus the photobook materialises these oscillations between absence and presence, through its physicality that invites interpretation. Just as hermeneutic perception does not occur in a neat chronology, neither should attempts to understand agency be mapped in linear, causal relationships (Law, 2002; Gadamer, 2004). Time has agency then, not only in aiding understanding each moment of photobook encounter, but assembling them into a greater, remembered and imagined whole, a Platonic idea-photobook that is the archetype to which all virtual encounters refer.

4. How encounters matter for photobook criticism

The type of information sought after by a methodology or constructed through the written communication of research *matters*, in the sense that it indicates a political, representational hierarchy of knowledge that, generally, values an artwork's historical or social context, subject matter, or artist biography over its embodied experience. Embodied ways of knowing such as those demonstrated in this article have been historically devalued and othered for their association with marginalised ways of being. This analysis has shown such insights not only stand on their own as valid critical responses, but can also serve as generative prompts for more conventional art sociological research. Spurred on by the intricacy of my encounter with this book, I could: extend the study through contacting the artist, or compare the affects of *Black Darkness* and *Another Black Darkness*; delve deeper into work by the book's designer Satoshi Machiguchi; or test other books of sensitive or controversial content, sitting in the same spot, with a similar consciousness of public performance; or compare others' subjective responses.

The photobook is "shaped by the cooperation of the photographer with other trades... the collective effort of the photographer, author, editor, designer, printer and publisher" (Neumüller, 2017: 2), but often these other trades and agencies are less valued than that of the artist, and presented as facilitating the artist's singular vision, rather than contributing their own textures and frictions. To imagine this network of co-operation and collaboration need not stop at the obvious creative roles involved in its production. An enquiry into the agency of the photobook rooted in posthuman ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) might imagine the agency of a lumber labourer from an alternative geographical and temporal reality who produces pulp for the paper, the inventor of a particular method of binding many centuries earlier, but also the computer that translates image to page through a digital printer – there are infinite social and technical inputs that contribute to shaping the distinct objecthood of each photobook.

The photobook's resistance to singular modes of use, interpretation and definition positions it as a postmodern medium. As Ihab Hassan has noted, the pluralism of postmodern perspectives "proposes a different kind of 'authority'" that

is pragmatic and empirical, and in which “there can be only continual negotiations of reason and interest, mediations of desire, transactions of power” (1986: 515). As each copy of a book can be revisited time and again, its interpretation is grounded in each empirical situation of those plural readings. This means there is a plurality of engagement activated by the reader as well as the author, and through the multiplicity of encounters.

Returning to encounters with *Another Black Darkness* reveals that, parallel to the official ontologies constructed by anthologies and taxonomies that seek to define and historicise the photobook, there exists a plurality of alternative individual, embodied, *felt* ontologies: including, but not limited to, how photobooks are understood by people who make them, how photobooks factor into the livelihoods of makers, what meanings photobooks have for those who buy them. These ontologies are not separate; they are hopelessly entangled in the moments we engage with photobooks as objects in the world. If we do not attune to these subtle aspects of encounter, intellect overwhelms response, and interpretations focus descriptively on “what the book is about” and less on “what the book is”. We must not become complacent with the privileged knowledges we have constructed and acquired through experience. Therefore, a combined approach giving attention to the social networks of production and consumption *as well as* the acute, impersonal affect of photobooks in specific encounters is required to understand photobook agency more holistically in terms of both substance and significance.

To be sufficiently motivated to write about a photobook, the photobook genre, or people involved in photobook production, authors must at some point have been *moved* by encounters with these objects. This indicates that an absence of encounters with photobooks in criticism to date is due to a lack of precedent or method to describe and make use of these experiences in scholarly terms. This article has shown the value of mobilising photobook encounters through critical analysis, and demonstrated one example of how to incorporate the personal and the political in making understandings about the agency of photobooks as objects and ideas in contemporary cultural economy.

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