

## **A Turn to Reception**

### Readers and Reading in the Contemporary Photobook Ecology

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

At the turn of the millennium, powered by emerging canons, a narrative of discovery and art-historical contextualisation, the photobook became a central object of interest for photographers, scholars and collectors. As a product of this situation a community coalesced, constructing photobook-specific events, platforms and publications that gave space to deep-dive the processes and products of book making. Now, the photobook enters a new moment. As large institutions embrace photography on the page more readily and the frenzy of the photobook phenomenon is tempered, an emerging critical movement seeks to address the sustainability, reception and legacy of the post-millennium medium. This article argues that key to such discussions will be the previously sidelined matter of reading and what it can contribute to a prevailing, production-oriented discourse. By reviewing what literature exists around the subject and its periphery, combining with reflections on the author's own activities and drawing from a number of contemporary photobook initiatives it is posited that there are three substantial challenges that can arrest visibility and comprehension of photobook reading. From the difficulty faced when speaking about books to an absence of space held to accommodate reading and the subdued level of interest in this elusive activity, each theme is outlined and expanded in turn before being located as pivotal in constructing a more inclusive and meaningful future for the photobook.

## **RESUMO:**

Na viragem do milénio, alimentado por cânones emergentes, por uma narrativa de descoberta e por contextualizações artísticas e históricas, o livro de fotografia obteve um lugar central no interesse de fotógrafos, investigadores e colecionadores. Como consequência, nasceu uma comunidade que passou a ocupar-se da criação de eventos, plataformas e publicações especificamente relacionados com o livro de fotografia, criando espaço para se aprofundar processos e produtos relacionados com a fabricação de livros. Hoje, o livro de fotografia entra numa nova fase. Enquanto instituições estabelecidas abraçam a fotografia em papel com mais facilidade e o frenesi do fenómeno do livro de fotografia esmorece, um movimento crítico emergente procura endereçar a sustentabilidade, a recepção e a herança do *medium* no pós-milénio. Este artigo argumenta que um aspecto fulcral para estas novas discussões será a questão, antes posta de lado, da leitura, e como esta pode contribuir para o discurso predominante, tradicionalmente orientado para a produção. Examinando a literatura que existe sobre este assunto e assuntos periféricos, associando-a a uma meditação sobre as actividades do próprio autor, e endereçando um conjunto de iniciativas contemporâneas relacionadas com os livros de fotografia, argumenta-se que há três desafios contemporâneos que podem travar a visibilidade e a compreensão da leitura de livros de fotografia. Das dificuldades que se se enfrenta ao falar-se sobre livros, à ausência de um espaço que acomode a leitura, e ao nível ainda moderado de interesse nesta actividade elusiva, cada tópico é delineado e expandido individualmente, antes de ser equacionado como crucial na construção de um futuro mais inclusivo e significativo para o livro de fotografia.

## **KEYWORDS:**

artists' books; audience; photobooks; publishing; reading

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**

edição; leitura; livros de artista; livros de fotografia; público

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## 1. The absent reader

With the foreshortening of time it is natural to view the photobook’s “rise to prominence” (Rule, 2015: 15) as a smooth ascent or else a homogenised expansion, but there are significant and definable moments to be recognised in its rapid ascension in the photography and art world. First, the photobook was posited as “an independent artistic medium” (The PhotoBook Museum, 2014: 17) with dedicated study, histories and an “embryonic canon” (Shannon, 2010: 55), before subsequently an ecology was constructed around it — confirming and supporting the photobook-as-art moment and introducing a present to an otherwise predominantly historical period of review and contextualisation. In the first moment, occurring at the shoulders of the new millennium, collectors, dealers, historians and librarians begun to map out a history and territory of photographic interactions with the book. Works like Horacio Fernández’s *Fotografía Pública* (1999), Andrew Roth’s *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (2001) and the first of Martin Parr and Gerry Badger’s *The Photobook: A History* series (2004) signified a serious turn of interest to a codex-based account of photography. In the exhibitions and publications of this moment there is a palpable atmosphere of discovery played up, with May Castleberry suggesting “nothing exceeds the enchantment of discovering a forgotten treasure” (2001: 105) and Martin Parr repeating the sentiment in describing the formation of a photobook canon as the “final frontier of the undiscovered” (2004: 4). The narrative of exploration and the urgent art-historical contextualisation of photobooks that took place at this time offered a rich comprehension of photographer’s book outputs and simultaneously lent to them a credibility and provenance valued by the art market. Parr and Badger’s books were cited for triggering “a collection boom” whereby “reference objects became collector fetishes” (PhotoBook Museum, 2014: 19) and in 2004, Andrew Roth looked back on the short period since his publication debuted, noting a “heightened awareness among bibliophiles of the photographic book as a rare object, a collectible” (Roth, 2004: 9).

Key to the validation of the photobook were the definitions<sup>1</sup> used to describe the characteristics of this newly historicised medium and qualify canon inclusions. Proposals like those from Roth who pitches the photobook as a holistic “work of art” (2001: 1) and Badger and Parr who consider it a representation of the author’s unique “artistic vision” (2004: 6-7) contributed to a building of artistic value<sup>2</sup>. In this way, the discourse around the photobook shared many similarities with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the “sphere of legitimation” whereby a given medium seeks to justify its existence as a true art form (1996: 95). Clément Chéroux, chief curator of photography at MoMA, sees the photobook as having “built a model of legitimation similar to the one photography itself used at the end of the twentieth century” (2021: 4), but the desire for such a move has been present for many more years. Finding its

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<sup>1</sup> A topic expanded on by José Luís Neves (2017) and Elizabeth Shannon (2010).

<sup>2</sup> As well as financial value — it can be uncomfortable to witness how influential collectors are in increasing the price of their own stock. As Elizabeth Shannon notes that, “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” (2010: 55).

way into numerous definitions and accounts of the photobook are the thoughts of Dutch photographer and designer Ralph Prins who articulated the medium as “an autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film” in 1969 (qtd. in Suermondt, 1989). Half a century later, Prins’ legitimacy claim was fully realised, with Chéroux declaring the photobook’s recent elevation to an artistic medium as the “ultimate phase” of “symbolic recognition” (2021: 4).

Having raised the photobook from a subset of arts publishing or curious adjunct to photographic history, a new period develops which is to be characterised by the formation of the contemporary photobook ecology. The heightened profile and status of the photobook piqued interest for collectors, dealers and institutions but significantly, for practitioners too. Photographers realised the opportunities a newly consecrated medium presented, not only as an “astute career move” (Badger and Parr, 2004: 9) but in response to enormous shifts in the presence of networked technologies in life and culture (Johnston, 2021: 30-44). Web 2.0 facilitated two-way content generation as well as knowledge exchange, print-on-demand services that presented low-risk publishing opportunities and e-commerce developments like Paypal enabling simple global payments to individuals. An ideal environment in which an ecology for the photobook rapidly expands in only a handful of years, circa 2008. This year saw the first Fotobook festival Kassel, to be followed by Fotobook Festival Oslo (2009) with other substantial and recurring events popping up around Europe in particular after the new decade; the Unseen photobook market (Amsterdam) in 2012, Vienna Photobook Festival in 2013 and Photobook Week Aarhus in 2014. Only a year on though and there is evidence of a critical turn — a point of separation from the celebration of the photobook towards a questioning of financial security, publishing logistics, purpose and direction. Publisher Michael Mack has frequently raised concerns about the limitations of the “photobook bubble” and its hubris (OstLicht. Galerie für Fotografie) and Bruno Ceschel pointed to the financial instability and saturation of the medium in 2015 (Smyth et al., 2015: 27). Actors like Mack and Ceschel are asking how we learn from the photobook’s recent history and take those serious about the possibilities of the medium forward to a more robust future. The photobook:RESET event run by Ceschel’s Self Publish, be Happy initiative sought to do just this in 2018 with a pointed call to “rethink where we are and better understand our own limitations, blind spots and scarce resources”.

One such blind spot is the recognition and visibility of readers and their readings which, throughout the moments set out above are either absent or showing the narrowest views of encounters with photobooks and approaches to representing them. The collectors and historians who wrote about photobooks in the period of frenzied cataloguing and canonising presented only a small slice of a reading spectrum with a prescribed form (typically 3-800 words) and function (to confirm the significance of a given publication within the remit of the canon). Such accounts do not engage with themes of access, reading environment, book handling, page navigation, assimilation or reader-response; in short, the personal circumstances and effects of reading. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that such subjectivity would lead to questions of bias and influence that are counter to the task of artistic recognition. Even as the authors of location-oriented photobook histories set out with fervour to explore “uncharted territories” (Parr et al., 2011: 7) to maintain a frontier-

like narrative of discovery and appease a growing appetite, attention seldom falls to the readers of the area in question. These readers and their situational reflections on books which engage with the land, people, politics and ideas of a place remain uncharted. Likewise, though the ecology of the photobook began to offer far greater variation and vibrancy of voice than the moment of legitimation, the overwhelming and underpinning atmosphere was one of production and contribution. Rather than reading being championed as a point of extension or fulfilment in the life of the book, it appeared as a byproduct.

It is against this backdrop that I founded The Photobook Club in 2009. Beginning as an online discussion platform the project invited different readers to share personal accounts on 11 canonised works in its first few years of its life. After this, and in an attempt to provide a less prescribed way to engage readers in reflecting on photobooks, the initiative moved to physical meetings with participants encouraged to bring a photobook on a given theme for open discussion. A philosophy of non-hierarchical discourse remained, and ensured that events placed no emphasis on the experiences or training of the individuals round the table, nor the perceived quality or legitimacy of books brought in. In this guise the Photobook Club rapidly expanded to over 50 locations in 34 countries. Though a central philosophy of open discourse and access united the clubs, decisions about events were devolved in order that individual communities could reflect the needs, resources and attendee interests of their respective locations. The project led to a number of other reading-focussed experiments in travelling boxes of books<sup>3</sup>, exhibitions and new publications<sup>4</sup> but remained on the periphery: a niche area of an already niche medium. Now, as the possibility for new topics of conversation and an interest in a review of the established discourse builds, reading might have its moment. In an effort to understand why reading is yet to feature prominently in the photobook ecology, what follows is an interrogation of three barriers reading faces if it is to be elevated on a level with making in our contemporary landscape. Beyond giving shape to these difficulties in order that they can be more easily recognised, methods and projects that can work against a tide of production and maker-centrism are brought to the fore with a view to support the realisation of more meaningful publishing approaches to communicating in an alienating world, or fulfilling what Natasha Christia (2020) calls the “potentiality” of the photobook:

Potentiality is a dual key: not only does it presuppose a horizon, but it also acknowledges the actual possibility of envisioning it. The embrace of potentiality involves a position of awareness, accountability, and perspective that can ground and sustain individual and collective existence amidst our adverse times.

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<sup>3</sup> Discussed later in this article.

<sup>4</sup> In 2012, following a month-long look at the work online, and with contributions from a range of readers, I set about producing an ebook and interactive PDF focussed on Ken Schles’ rare *Invisible City* (1988) photobook. The publication was called *Invisible City: A digital resource* (Johnston and Schles, 2012) and was made available for free. Within the first six months it had been downloaded more than 2,000 times and was described by writer Taco Hidde Bakker as one of “the most surprising 2012 photobook publications”, which he cited as “an excellent example of how... photobooks can be lifted out of the shadows and be studied in a public realm beyond the traditional library” (Bakker, 2012).

## 2. An inadequacy of language

To begin any discussion on reading the photobook it is important to note how quickly our language presents problems. As Gerry Badger discussed in the inaugural edition of Aperture's *The PhotoBook Review*, we can conceive of encounters with the photobook owing as much to *watching* cinema or *looking* at pictures as to *reading* the book (2011: 3). In adopting the word *reading*, a particular set of assumptions is generated — some of which may resonate clearly whilst others are so removed from individual experiences with the photobook as to appear to be an entirely different activity. The term however does offer a usefully broad scope when seeking to move away from exclusive tendencies and the narrow perspectives of book experiences currently visible. Reading encompasses other terms and modes of encounter<sup>5</sup> (of the book but also the land, social situations, expressions etc.) which accommodates the material, chronological, semiotic and phenomenological aspects of the photobook in a manner that watching and looking fail to achieve. With an intent to open up and strengthen, rather than restrain, new conversations about our photobook encounters, *reading and readers* are thus adopted here.

There have been a number of attempts to offer accounts of reading in literature around the photobook, and its close relation the artists' book, with each offering a piece of a puzzle I have tried to construct in my own "acts of reading" (Johnston, 2021: 145). Tim Daly accentuates the role of touch and haptics as vital to explorations of the artists' book, Doug Spowart put forward his ten steps to reading the photobook, Victoria Cooper has explored montage in the visual book and Bettina Lockemann espoused a phenomenological leaning in which the book "accommodates a quest for immersion" for the sequence in "a perfect way" (2014: 126). All of these proposals and aspect-oriented approaches have their place but herein lies the crux of the matter. The melée of reading permutations which reflect the medium as one of "*Gesamt-kunstwerk* (a synthesis of the arts)" (Kruse and Gaetti, 2021: 15) can make the task seem futile. Then, when we acknowledge that reading the photobook is a frequently changing personal activity that can extend for hours, weeks and years, the issue is only compounded. Shaped by recommendations, reviews or prior knowledge of the makers, reading begins at a distance and stretches out as books are placed on bookshelves or piled on the floor, gradually finding semi-permanent homes and awaiting chance encounters with the spines of neighboured books or a subsequent selection from familiar and new readers. This transference, whereby the book is removed from a context of production in the hands of its makers to those of the reader, is a powerful component in the long-term reading of a work. Photographer Eric van der Weijde describes how the book "gains strength as it gets decontextualised by its viewer, owner, or bookcase in which it stands" (2017: 9), becoming assimilated into the life and thought of its custodian. So, just as Keith Smith articulated with his description of intended and random referrals through

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<sup>5</sup> Further discussion of how we describe encounters with the photobook can be found in Briony Carlin's PhD thesis *Bindings, Boundaries and Cuts: Relating Agency and Ontology in Photobook Encounters* (2021) and *Photobooks &* (Johnston, 2021: 133-154). See also the work of Joanna Cresswell and Oliver Whitehead (2015).

image sequence (1994: 105), the same can be said about the life of the book. Did John Gossage intend for my copy of *The Pond* to have been dissected and re-edited by students? Did Virginie Rebetez picture *Out of the Blue* sitting in between Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa's *Dark Mirrors* and Omar Kholeif's *Art in the Age of Anxiety*? Reading is a difficult thing to speak about, but there are noteworthy contributions to discourse that reflect photobook encounters. In these there are clues as to how reading can be translated into a communicable account — a pivotal juncture in the comprehension of book life and impact beyond maker-centric metrics and markers of validity or worth.

In 2021 SOURCE magazine released a video project whereby three photobooks<sup>6</sup> were given to two reading groups "who usually read novels" with the result in each case a lively and critical debate (SOURCE Photographic review, 2021). The conversation moves around between the art of the image and the skill of the photographer to the ability of the book to represent specific moments in history and the feelings imbued from the reading. It is a view and insight of processes and values in engagement from outside the photobook ecology which creates an element of tension when the expert's (SOURCE's own term) reflections are interspersed. Though there is no proclaiming of right or true readings, there are markedly different approaches to the books at play, and with it, knowledge and assumptions about the work. At one point (15:39), David Company recounts his brother-in-law leafing through Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places* and commenting on the frequency of MGB cars<sup>7</sup>. Company states that this is as true a reading as any other but, that his assertion is required presents a reminder that there exists an expectation on photobook encounters. In his account of legitimation, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that readers can no longer be consumers with the right to "judge freely", instead they "feel measured according to objective norms, and forced to adopt a dedicated, ceremonial and ritualised attitude" (1996: 95). This can be seen overtly in Jörg Colberg's introduction to the publication *Understanding Photobooks* in which he suggests that at the culmination of the book, its readers will be able to "engage with [photobooks] in a much more refined way" (2017: 11), as well as in Gerry Badger's reflections on reading in his musical analogy:

One might take the analogy between a good and a bad symphony conductor. The bad conductor treats the score primarily on a visceral level, treating each passage, a tune or phrase, as an episode in itself. The good conductor is aware of the music's intellectual as well as its visceral qualities. He gets the most out of each passage, of course, but also treats the work as a whole and not just the sum of its parts, pointing out its overarching structure. (2011: 3)

Such a prescribed account of how readers should engage with the book limits the likelihood of readers less familiar with the medium sharing thoughts and generating an expectation on the language and content of reading if it is to be made public. Simple descriptions and say-what-you-see or say-what-you-feel approaches

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Frank's *The Americans*, Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places* and Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

<sup>7</sup> Something Shore later confirmed as reflecting his wife's love for the car and thus his predisposition for their inclusion.

which might equip many readers with some confidence in proffering reflection appear inadequate or over-simplified in the face of formalist and structuralist interpretations.



**Figure 1.** A spread (pp. 5-6) from Markus Schaden and Frederic Lezmi's *Reading New York: A PhotoBookStudy on William Klein's Life is Good & Good for You in New York*.

A record of reading with a very different approach can be seen in *Reading New York. A PhotoBookStudy on William Klein's Life is Good & Good for You in New York* shown at the Photobook Phenomenon event in Barcelona curated by Markus Schaden and Frederic Lezmi. There, an exploded view of the photobook took over a large black wall and brought together design choices, sequencing and the political and social contexts of production and reception. There is an element of formal and focussed study in this presentation of reading but when joined by the small publication of the same name we see a far more playful and subjective reading take place (see fig. 1). As elements of the exhibition are shown, words fill the page at various type sizes that generate a stream-of-reading with its surprises, crescendos and rhythms. The reading shared in this book is *not* refined and most certainly *is* visceral.

In my own research I have worked with a variety of data collection methods to help construct proposals for a language which can scaffold our interactions with the photograph on the printed page. The most illuminating have been those that provide a route to bypass the textual — like graphical elicitation. Graphical elicitation exercises can be met with forensic detail or haphazard fluidity by respondents whilst retaining the opportunity for greater understanding in subsequent response-led conversations which can draw out themes and “stimulate thoughts” (Copeland and Agosta, 2012: 514). Between 2018-19 I conducted 27 postal interviews featuring graphical elicitation as part of a multi-methodological approach to comprehending photobook navigation and experience with responses offering great depth, particularly with follow-up in-person interviews. Building on this work, more recently I undertook an experiment that translated traditional graphical elicitation



to include a material component that was directly layered into a book encounter. Using coloured cards of different shapes and sizes which respondents were able to insert directly into a chosen book, they were offered a way in which to form their own taxonomies and systems of speaking about experience. Such autonomy and flexibility requires additional investment in time on the side of the researcher but can help to de-restrict reader's responses and move away from expectations of what reading should be. SOURCE's recorded events, Schaden and Lezmi's studies and my own experiments show how removing expectations of clear, linear and confined textual reflection can open up a vastly different view of reading. If the reading space of the expert is defined by character limits, copy-stand images and intertextual references, perhaps the space of broader readings are to be reader-defined, messy and interpretive locations of self-definition.

### 3. A space for the reader

The photobook is frequently discussed as a space, or collection of spaces. Despite being considered "an architectural volume" (Vanthuyne, 2022: 9) or "a self-run artist's space" (Senior, 2015: 10), little is spoken of regarding the room we give for entrants to the photobook. The absence of readers and reading from the contemporary discourse of the photobook is not only a product of limitations and expectations of language but also the struggle to make space in the photobook ecology which thrives on production and celebration as contributions to the apparent health of the medium. Awards and competitions draw in new works on an annual basis with those shortlisted often housed in modest locations on a limited budget, covering tables and shelves with little room in-between. Likewise fairs or festivals with marketplaces feature publisher tables typically stacked high with new (and some old) titles. These instances present a vibrant environment with a wealth of exciting works but they also represent the underlying financial instability of a niche product and the necessity to squeeze revenue from the commodity of physical space. Online, a different challenge for the space of reading is presented. There, while space is not as costly, nor sparse, attention instead is limited. Photobook-specific social media communities are places with a high turnover of content and little conversation or reflection. An environment that is conducive to quick sharing, notices of publications and competition deadlines, though even these have little response (Johnston, 2021: 56-9). In the cluttered rooms of the festival, and the crowded confines of the online community, where is the room for reading?

Aperture's recent launch of a PhotoBook Club<sup>8</sup> has the potential to insert the reader into a prominent space via live events (subsequently shared on Youtube) with a variety of guests discussing particular works but here we find crisp echoes of legitimation tendencies. In June 2022 the Aperture PhotoBook Club focused on Wendy Red Star's *Delegation*, inviting four guests to join Wendy in conversation — the senior editor of Aperture magazine, two art historians and the book's designer. Such a collection is likely to lead to a particular presentation of reading (and indeed

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<sup>8</sup> No relation to The Photobook Club, nor Tom Broadbent's Photobook Club Collective.

it does) as an activity for an audience dedicated to the medium to undertake. Aperture did not purport to focus on readers, and the description of the project which invites an audience to “look at and learn from the most compelling photobooks in the field” (Aperture 2022) is a giveaway regarding its intent, but it demonstrates how even in places which could offer some room to a spectrum of encounters with the book, the pull towards the context of production outstrips that of reading and the context of reception.

There are exceptions which seek to provide space to readers and readings outside what is established and may be expected. The well-known 10x10 Photobooks’ reading room iterations and the PhotoBook Museum’s public exhibition *A World in Transition* for example, but also less familiar initiatives like Offset Projects travelling *pitara*<sup>9</sup> organised by Anshika Varma. For Varma, who recognises the potential of the photobook to make “connections with people”, the space created around the works at a public presentation<sup>10</sup> of photobooks is integral to engagement, with “tiny triggers” helping to construct an environment which embraces reading:

How you organise the space in which you place the book becomes very very important ... I make sure that there’s always a chair that invites you to sit with each book. It’s a small thing, but to know that [you] can sit down and look at the book completely changes engagement. (Varma, 2021)

Rather than invigilators being present, or text being included which prescribes and foreshadows a reading, Varma works with frames containing “small paragraphs to give you a feeling of what the book might be about”, encouraging readers to pick up books without leading or revealing its themes or messages. Offset Projects’ *pitara* also gives readers an opportunity to respond to what they have seen with the inclusion of a writing desk and postcards designed so as to “allow the readers a moment after going through the work to sit down in one place and maybe assimilate what they’ve taken from the book”.

A space for reading is a theme I have investigated practically myself. The Photobook Club, in its most basic form, is a space for reading — inviting individuals to sit together with little purpose other than to read. A lack of recording at events helps to facilitate open reflections, as does the role of the organiser to avoid their own projection of experience or knowledge which lessens that of others. Juan Cires (2021) of the prolific Photobook Club Madrid highlights that the absence of authority and lack of teaching at the events was “especially valuable” and one of the elements of the project he cherishes the most. In 2013 I extended the visibility of group reading by posting a box of books round the world to stop at different communities. Together with the books I included a notebook which was soon filled with signatures, stickers and thoughts on the books that could be seen by subsequent readers. A record of collective reading, the notebook and accompanying ephemera that was placed in the

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<sup>9</sup> “The library is called the offset ‘pitara’ — in English it translates to ‘trunk’” (Varma, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> There are expectations of locations to complicate the picture here. As Russet Lederman of 10x10 Photobooks noted in relation to the reading room organised at the New York Public Library, such a space is vastly different from “the Museum of modern Art or... somewhere that has art with a capital ‘A’” because in those spaces you are engaging with “someone who is already putting on their thinking caps thinking that art is what they’re going in to see” (Lederman et al., 2020).

box at each stop is a reminder of reading as a product of our location (as well as so many other factors), and the potential for reading to share a “boundary between private and public states of being” (Shaw, 2016: 146). On return, the books had been handled by upwards of 300 readers, so it was no surprise that there were signs of wear and tear — spines starting to crack and pristine pages smudged or folded. In a maker-centric environment that reveres the photobook as art object, these may be unforgivable occurrences but in the context of reading they are representative of what Matthew Stadler terms a “reading economy” (2018: 118). This economy, which is tied together with his conception of public coalescence, requires the formation of space which is accessible and inviting: “Publics begin in wilful actions, an invitation, an event. A public can arise in any defined space that is open to strangers — a street, a meeting hall, a plaza or bar, a book...” (Stadler, 2018:122) or even a box of them.

Events like my own, those that Varma has been involved in, as well as reading rooms and book shows run by the likes of 10x10 Photobooks and The PhotoBook Museum evidence a role for intermediaries or activators to help realise specific publics for the book. The space they construct online and offline is a place of non-purchase reading which has the potential to shift a discourse from a focus on product and process to that of reading and reception. It is worth considering though, whether book activation is being outsourced to reflect specific skills and knowledge, or because it is deemed less significant than making<sup>11</sup>. Natasha Christia, who herself has curated book-oriented exhibitions (*What's this book?* in 2016 and *Uncensored Books*, 2017), argues for a rethinking of the photobook as “an encounter and an event”, thus raising “demands on us and on what we can do with it” (Christia, 2020). Sharing similarities with Stadler, she calls for “situations that re-orchestrate the moment of writing and reading, and allow for more inclusive environments of hospitality, discussion, and knowledge production touching upon all categories of society” that are currently absent from contemporary photobook spaces. To adopt such an approach is possible and proven in small instances, but requires a wilful community to engender a more fundamental shift.

#### **4. An appetite for reading**

Following the contentious histories and canons of the photobook as well as the elevation of the medium from container to art object, came a contemporary turn to production. Responding to small gallery closures, the erosion of traditional publishing models and buoyed by new interest around the photograph and page, practitioners set about doing it themselves. The photobook became a popular and primary output for many works which would, only 15 years prior, have been realised through different means. The positioning of the medium as artist-led, whereby all elements of the book project are considered in harmony, not only had an impact on the legitimacy and resulting desire for outputs in this form but also sets expectations for makers to undertake intra-medium interrogations and experimentations.

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<sup>11</sup> Engineer and educator Debbie Chachra offers a fascinating insight into the gendered hierarchy of making and not-making in tech culture which offers many connections to the contemporary photobook world.

Numerous photobook workshops, courses and academic curricula encourage makers to be un-compromising in their approach to realising their artistic vision<sup>12</sup> leading to increasingly arcane works and production particularities being so prevalent they are “almost considered a given” (Martin, 2017: 13). The products of this situation are increasingly sophisticated works demanding an equally sophisticated audience “who have the time to commit to learning how to read the photobook” (Martin, 2019).

It must then be asked whether the makers of the photobook, who also comprise the existing audience of the medium (Abril et al., 2015: 28) have an appetite for exploring broader approaches to reading and reflections on the act which are not connected explicitly to conversations of production, product or legitimation? Put differently, are the players of the photobook ecology willing to engage with reading which may challenge the apparent vibrancy of the medium and could disrupt the established traditions and systems that have been put in place over the last two decades? Making space for reading and employing strategies to mitigate difficulties in the language of the activity means giving over space held for making. It means also accepting vulnerabilities of the medium, the slowness of reading and inevitable growing pains as another force enters the discourse. To read the photobook is to make the photobook — folding out what was folded in, expanding what was condensed, constructing a world from the page. Thus to invite reading reflections is to open up a Pandora’s box of possibilities as diverse as the source material from which they are born. That these outcomes may not adhere to common approaches or expectations places reader and maker alike in a vulnerable position:

There’s always more people out there who will talk about how [the book] was made than why it was made. Maybe that’s because people don’t want to look stupid. Because they’re too scared to put their ideas forward in case everyone laughs at them and what they thought of it. So they talk about how it’s made because they can’t get that wrong. (Bodman, 2008)

There are several recent attempts to open discourse up to the reading and reception of the photobook and the entangled medium of the artist’s book. In 2021 Photoresearcher dedicated an issue to the reception of the photobook. Christoph and Markus Schaden’s bold introduction to the subject claimed that “only when photographic reproductions have found resonance in exhibitions and publications, and subsequently been subjected to a discursive discussion, can they become relevant and invested with meaning for the public” (2021: 1-2). They go on to call into question what parameters and aspects of a book under scrutiny have been considered in reviews to-date as well as which “were left out” (2) before calling for a focus on “the reception of photobooks in future research” (5). The articles which follow are not representative of a broad spectrum of readers and readings, instead looking at the social, cultural and political contexts and impacts of reception articulated by experts, but the move away from production-oriented conversation is nonetheless marked. In the field of the artist’s book too there is a swell of critical appraisal regarding the role and shape of the review, if not reading more widely. In ‘A New Manifesto for Book Art Criticism’, a project by Megan N. Liberty, David Solo

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<sup>12</sup> A key strategy in the legitimation of the medium outlined in the introduction.

and Corina Reynolds, they detail a number of proposals and actions for the progression of critique which begins to touch on facets of reading and readership, creating space for varied voices and even counter-cans. The manifesto speaks of “demystifying artist books” in order to make them “more accessible to a wider audience”, “encouraging dialogue about book art in as many forms and forums as possible” and open discussion about “what book criticism should look like”. Even here though, there are pertinent questions about reading that are left out and there remains a hint of medium insecurity resulting in a number of legitimising tendencies as in Megan N. Liberty locating the purpose of the manifesto as “trying to get people to think about books” in the same “way they think about film, performance, and poetry”. The manifesto has a bearing on the photobook not only because of the increasingly obfuscated differences between the mediums but their porous borders which see individuals and institutions span the divide and port thematic discussions. As well as his role as founder and contributor to the Center for Book Arts’ *Book Art Review*, Solo is a prominent writer, researcher and collector of the photobook. Coinciding with the MoMA forum on photobooks Solo wrote about the role of photobook criticism for *Aperture*, highlighting that existing coverage of photobooks is typically promotional, descriptive or else mines and repeats publisher’s statements. Part of Solo’s answer to the problem of criticism is organised around education and insight to address the form and language of “photobooks that would otherwise seem totally opaque” but also recognises the need to include “other voices to discuss [book] choices and their impact on the reading experience”.

While appetite for the photobook and its production can be said to be induced by the ecosystem and spaces that teach the photobook as “a powerful medium to show your work in” (Ceschel, 2019), it appears that appetite for the other side of the book’s “conversation with a stranger in the future” (Singh, 2021: 16-17) is still somewhat suppressed. Aside from the small number of reading-oriented reflections and interventions that do exist (some of which have been outlined in this article), there is limited evidence of interest in engaging with questions of reading and its comprehension, especially when it relates to a readerships located outside the established photobook-buying (and thus making) audience. The myth of reading may well be such an essential tool for the continued legitimation of the medium that is hard to relinquish. Returning to Bourdieu’s spheres of legitimation, the sociologist notes how, when work in question faces a threat of going unnoticed (“because there is no audience capable of recognising it”), the “role of the group which recognises and sanctions the work seems to be essential” (1996: 148). To attempt a demystification of reading may damage the photobook-as-art stasis and erode the protective enclave of the photobook which has been so creatively profitable to its participants. To replace a protective, medium-specific environment with a more open orientation could be seen as pandering to market desires, the antithesis of a medium built on what designer Hans Gremmen describes as works which should be “pure and bold” (Gremmen and Nunziata, 2020: 167). The fear of a “loss of purity” (Costa, 2019: 88) not only relates to individual works and their makers, but to the medium itself. Challenging the history and ecology outlined in the previous pages is, unsurprisingly, an unappealing activity for those involved in the labour of its construction. There are a number of reasons why the contemporary photobook

ecology may be reluctant to engage with a more diverse and in-depth look at reading, but there are benefits to an alteration of focus that may contribute to a robust future for the medium.

## 5. A return on reading

The difficult task of wielding language to communicate reading, a lack of space in which to accommodate and witness photobook encounters and a lack of appetite for engagement with the activity in the photobook ecology are all significant factors as to why reading has remained predominantly absent from our burgeoning photobook discourse. There are though initiatives and techniques which combat these challenges or else show ways in which they may be overcome. For reading to become a meaningful contributor to a holistic photobook ecology, these approaches should be adopted now while indications that interest and activity around the photobook is morphing are prevalent. The ceasing of zeitgeist collections that were sold to libraries and archives<sup>13</sup> in order that they can be preserved as a moment in time and Aperture's dedicated journal (*The PhotoBook Review*) becoming subsumed into their regular quarterly magazine are some of the most telling clues as to the way in which medium-specific activity is — like a startup — being smoothed out from its peak and spread into more permanent, traditional spaces. At the same time as Aperture's decision on *The PhotoBook Review*, the Museum of Modern Art ran a Forum event titled 'The PhotoBook Phenomenon: 1999-2021' dedicated to "art form that has achieved a new level of photographic creativity, experimentation, and awareness in the 21st century" (MoMA), a past-tense framing which confirms Clément Chéroux's assertion that the process of legitimation is complete (2021: 4). As many of the examples discussed in this article demonstrate, this doesn't translate to the ceasing of legitimation strategies and discourses but does present the possibility for a tempering of the energies exerted to its cause. If we were to continue the periodisation proposed in "The absent reader", we are thus at the border and beginnings of a third moment yet to be carved out.

At this juncture the makers, those most likely to influence the direction of the next stage in an almost two hundred year history of the photobook, might reasonably ask what reading could bring to the future prosperity of the photobook. So far its benefits may seem abstract. If however it is taken as supplementary to other critical moves — towards expanded audiences, towards environmentally conscious production, towards a more diverse set of players in positions of power in the established ecology — its merits become clearer. A move towards a thorough consideration of readers and reading exposes rifts in literacy that can be met through education (as Solo and the Book Arts Review group propose) or, more radically, in the adjustments of makers outputs which may morph in adoption of alternative visual language styles and physical construction. As Walter Costa posits in thinking about the insular nature of the photobook ecology: "Isn't empathy with readers the

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<sup>13</sup> The Indie Photobook Library to Yale's Bienecke library and Self Publish, Be Happy to Maison Européenne de la Photographie.

only possible starting point to getting out of the circle?” (2019: 88). Likewise, by asking what happens with books produced, how they are activated and how the greatest impact of reception can be garnered from each individual codex, the photobook becomes more efficient in its use of various materials and energies (human and otherwise). And finally, to recognise the influence of readers’ situations on the readings they undertake can encourage a recalibration of the Western formation and governance of existing representations of reading in the form of reviews, judging notes and catalogue accompaniments. Bruno Ceschel would like to see more thought given to “different experiences and different readings” (Ceschel, 2019) and Tate Shaw similarly suggests that an opening up of the readings we are exposed to can be a symbiotic idea exchange between makers and readers:

I want more people to tell me what they’re seeing when they’re reading a book by Ron Jude or by somebody else and I want to know what people are connecting to, because that opens up like a bibliography... it opens up a whole other realm of possibilities. (Shaw, 2018)

Alongside these benefits are tools and platforms which will make the sidelining of reading hard to maintain. Instagram, which has been such a significant platform for makers in publicity is offering a view to the post-sale life of the book in reader’s images which connect with maker’s handles. This act, which could be skewed in the interest of performative reading and the projection of idealised reading situations, nonetheless shows the book as an object in the world. Designer Alex Lin of Studio Lin speaks of his excited to “literally follow [the photobook] into the hands of the people who have purchased it”, seeing the book “in ways and places that you’d never imagine” (Lin and Susuda, 2022). Lin’s awareness of what the reader and their choices for the life of their books gives back in knowledge is a tangible account of van der Weijde’s decontextualised works and Shaw’s sentiment of collaboration.

Away from the volume of production celebration and the vocal positioning of the photobook-as-art narrative, books are extending themselves into reader’s worlds and fostering joy, introspection, humour, forgiveness, passion and knowledge exchange. Rather than “automatic validation and recognition” of the photobook, reading recognises that “the real work takes place in a very silent way” (Christia, 2021). Reading confronts the potential inertia of the photobook and its irrelevance to communities beyond those who foster and construct the medium. Clément Chéroux suggests that the photobook sits 40 years behind the artist’s book in its “phase of development” (2021: 4) but it is worth asking whether such a trajectory is even desirable. It would mean that in 2035 we would face the same dilemma that Simon Cutts observed with the artist’s book in a speech at the Tate gallery’s Artist’s books conference in 1995, an occurrence that would seem to fail the potentiality of the photobook medium: “If the whole arena is predicated on artists rather than the books themselves, then we will have made it a mirror of the gallery world, rather than benefit from a medium that has no social boundaries, and can precipitate change” (2007: 89).

If instead the photobook set course on a different bearing — one that embraces reading as central rather than peripheral — there is an opportunity to producing a truly exciting moment.

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