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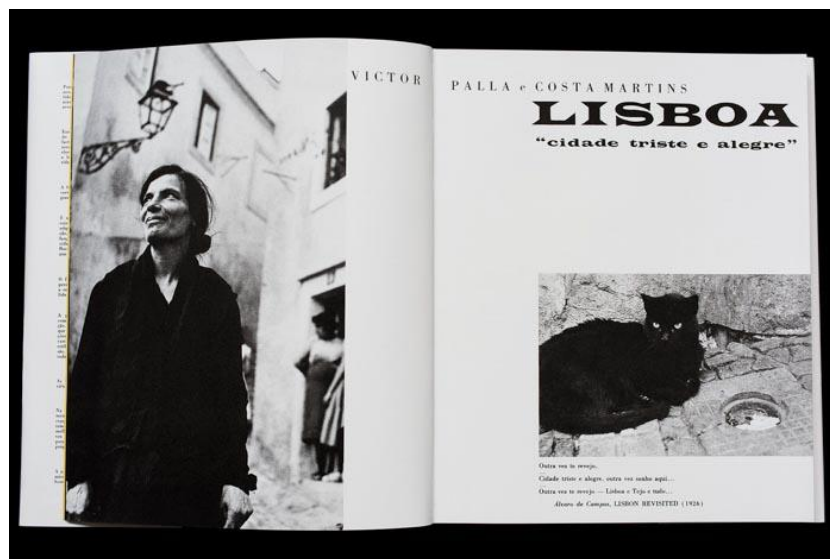
A Conversation with André Príncipe & José Pedro Cortes (Pierre von Kleist), by José Bértolo



José Bértolo: How did Pierre von Kleist starts as a publishing house?

José Pedro Cortes: The name “Pierre von Kleist” first appeared in 2005, when my book *Silence* was published. Back then, we mainly wanted to have a way of disseminating our work. We had a joint exhibition and André had the experience of publishing a photobook with another publisher. I had been planning my first book, and I wanted to ensure I had a certain amount of control over it. So, because there wasn't really a photography book publisher in Portugal with a strong editorial vision, we set up Pierre von Kleist and published *Silence*. Between 2005 and 2009, we published a few books, and in 2009 came the second decisive moment for PvK: a new edition of the Portuguese classic photobook *Lisboa, Cidade Triste e Alegre*, by Victor Palla and Costa Martins. We spoke with Martin Parr and Gerry Badger about this ambitious editorial project, Badger came to Lisbon on that occasion and ended up writing about the book. In fact, Badger's piece would be the only new addition to the materials of the original edition. The book was published in 2009, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first edition, and it was a tremendous success.

With Pierre von Kleist, we created a space where we could publish not only our work, but also that of artists we admired. All this according to a specific concept of the book as an object, something that doesn't follow the premises of the catalog or the photography book understood as the corollary of an artistic journey, and often associated with a previous exhibition.



Victor Palla & Costa Martins, *Lisboa, Cidade Triste e Alegre*

JB: How do you see the changes in the publishing world between 2005 and 2022?

JPC: When we attended the first photography fair, Offprint, in 2010, there must have been about 6 publishers and 5 bookstores there...

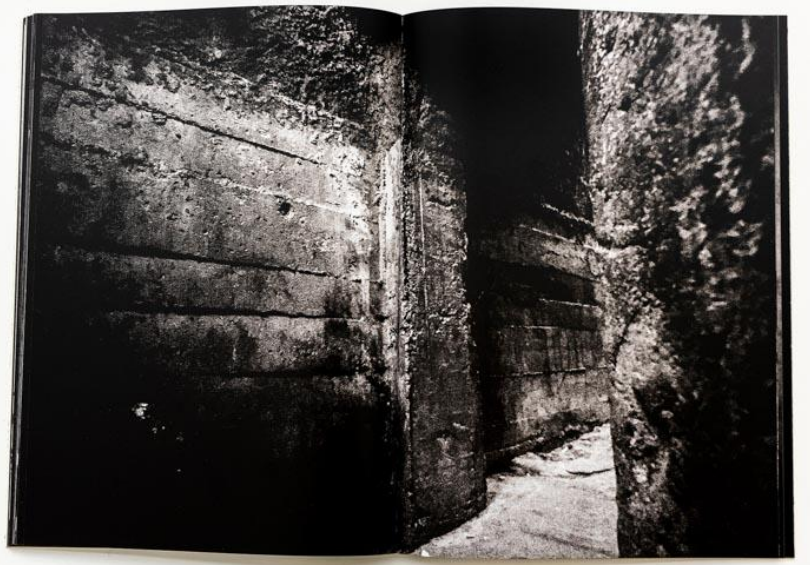
André Príncipe: I would like to add that when we decided to start a publishing house in 2005, we really wanted to make books. We were particularly interested in the book as a medium. That is why it wouldn't make sense for us to open a gallery

or something like that. We wanted to publish our own books, but also the books of others. We wanted to create something new. We grew up together, and as kids we watched a lot of movies and read a lot of different magazines. It was quite rare for us to find photography books in the 80s, but when we did, it was always wonderful. But back then, photography books usually corresponded to established bodies of work. There was a considerable *décalage* between the moment the photographs were taken and the moment the book came out. Our urgency, our youthful desire, coming from magazines, from fanzines, was to publish without the validation of time.

There was this connection to fanzines and this punk “do it yourself” culture. We wanted to take pictures and publish them a year later, without going through museums or galleries. That was the energy. It had to do with having no internet, no digital photography. There was this urgency to cultivate the pure gesture. Nowadays, the gesture is completely different. Our latest books — Engström’s, Rui Chafes’, Julião Sarmento’s — are very far from this. These days, we are back to those slow books, with bodies of work made from 20, 30, 40 years of artistic practice. The internet and the digital technologies are widespread. Today you can take a picture and publish it immediately. This definitely had an impact on what a photobook publisher wants to publish. In face of these changes, we ended up going the opposite way of the beginning of our publishing journey: slow vs. fast.

JB: How would you define? the identity of Pierre von Kleist?

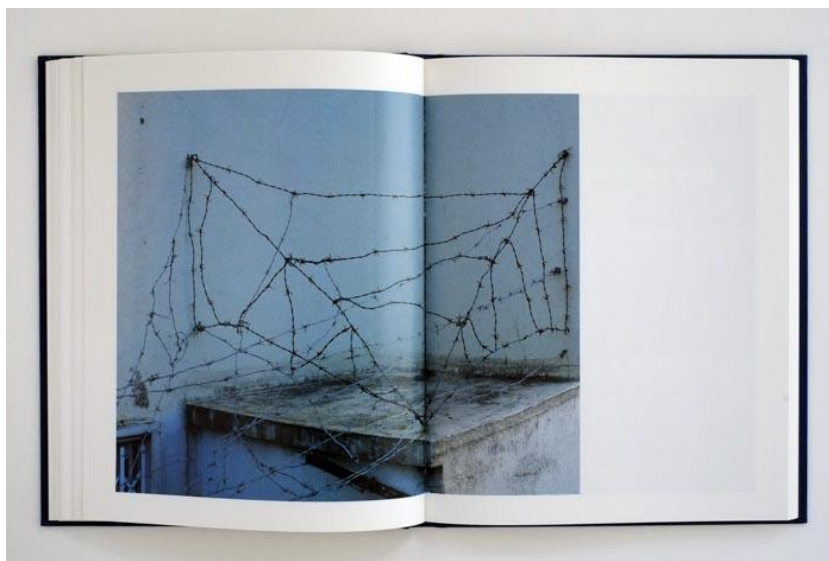
JPC: We have always been interested in works that deal with the contemporary world, that have a strong relationship with the present. This can be seen in the images themselves, as documents, but also in the “mental images” that the books project for us. The identity of PvK is not easy to put into words. It is certainly there, but it is not so easy to explain. There is something intuitive, something organic, in the process of selection and collaboration with the artists.



Pedro Costa & Others, *Vitalina Varela: Caderno de Rodagem*

AP: It is truly hard to explain, but some aspects can be described. For example, the importance of literature and cinema, but also Eisenstein’s theories of montage, and the fact that I studied cinema at the university. All this informs the kind of books we do. Pedro Costa, to whom we are very close, always says: “poetry and current affairs”. That can be a way to describe what we are interested in.

Then, and not programmatically, we ended up focusing on a “square” made up from me, José Pedro Cortes, António Júlio Duarte, and André Cepeda. This square became the core of PvK. And this happened, again, organically, based on affinities, both personal and work-related. Somehow, the four of us share the desire — a sense of mission — to contribute to the establishment of PvK and Portuguese photography in the world. Later, Pedro Costa joined us, and his ideas have contributed to the spirit of PvK. So, we don’t really try to create an identity: it comes naturally.



André Cepeda, *Ballad of Today*

JPC: In a way, our journey has also been marked by a sense of rejection. Maybe we could have positioned ourselves in a more commercially attractive place, we could have accepted more invitations, etc. But it was important to say no, to prevent being contaminated...

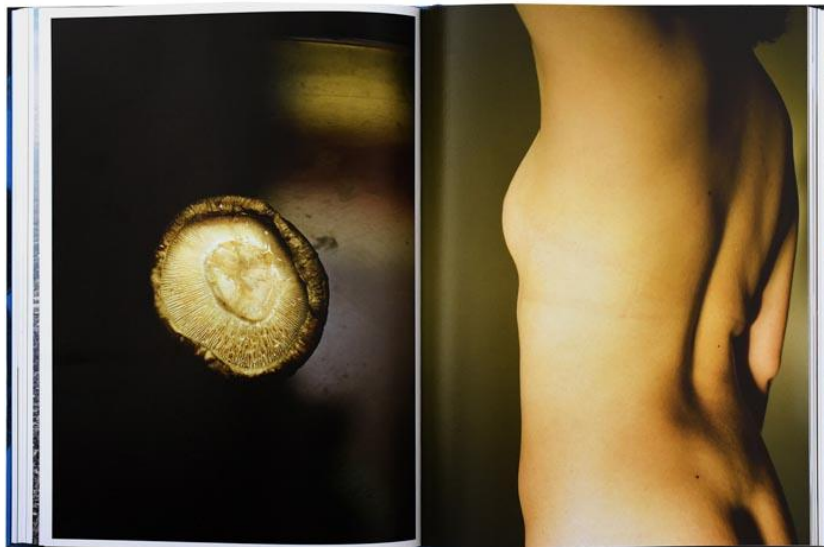
But going back to the evolution of the publishing market... When the first Offprint took place in 2010, the founder Yannick Bouillis invited us to be there. He told us that he had this idea of creating a fair dedicated to photography books in Paris... and at the time we kind of laughed at that prospect, because there was no market. It was very small. There was the elitist part of it, with big and important publishers such as Steidl or Aperture. Then, there were books of small print runs, with no commercial ambition, much closer to the idea of the artist’s book, combining the artist’s thoughts and the industrial mechanics. These alternatives were very few and started to grow from there.

JB: What do you think about the geography of the photobook market?

AP: It's much better than it was ten years ago, when there were almost no alternatives to publishers that came from more powerful countries. But even today this is a story about the rich against the poor. And, in the case of Europe, it is Southern Europe vs. Northern Europe. Ten years ago, there were few publishers coming from the South. We were among the first. Initially it was strange to go to book fairs and think: "where are the Spanish publishers? Where are the Italian? Where are the Greek?"

Traditionally, photobooks come from Central Europe: Switzerland, Germany... Steidl, Verlag, Pierre von Kleist... This name was a way of positioning ourselves: we can pass as *the same*, but underneath we are *different*.

JPC: Publishing photography books is fun and gives people pleasure, but one must not forget that this is mainly an economic activity. When you are in Paris and you attend the book launch of a new artist published by a Dutch publisher, 200 people show up. But when you attend the book launch of a Portuguese artist, three or four friends show up. Portugal still doesn't have a strong presence in the world of photography. There are not enough people, curators, institutions. The money for the books comes out of our own pockets. We almost don't count on state subsidies like it is a usual practice in other countries. As publishers, we feel this geographical difference. We are working against the grain. Even then, we always try to respect our books and create the best possible objects. That is important for us.



José Pedro Cortes, *One's Own Arena*

JB: The books you publish are quality objects sold at quite affordable prices. This seems counterintuitive, given the difficulties of production...

JPC: The truth is that our publishing house doesn't make any money. Financial profit is certainly not the reason why we make books. And we allow this to happen because publishing is not our core business. We are professional photographers. We have the capacity of making books, we invest everything we have in them, but we don't gain any money from them personally. The prices at which we sell them are

levelled down and the calculation is based on the production costs and the costs of circulation. It must be this way, because low prices help us reach more people. And we want our books to have reach. For instance, we had to work hard for António Júlio Duarte — who is an established and respected artist in Portugal — to be well known abroad. Books, and their authors, need all sorts of boosts to circulate.

JB: Besides the “square” you mentioned [Príncipe, Cortes, Duarte, Cepeda] and other Portuguese artists that are close to you, such as Pedro Costa or Rui Chafes, how do other authors, especially foreign, get into your catalog? I remember, for example, JH Engström, Osamu Kanemura, Keiko Nomura...



Keiko Nomura, *Okinawa*

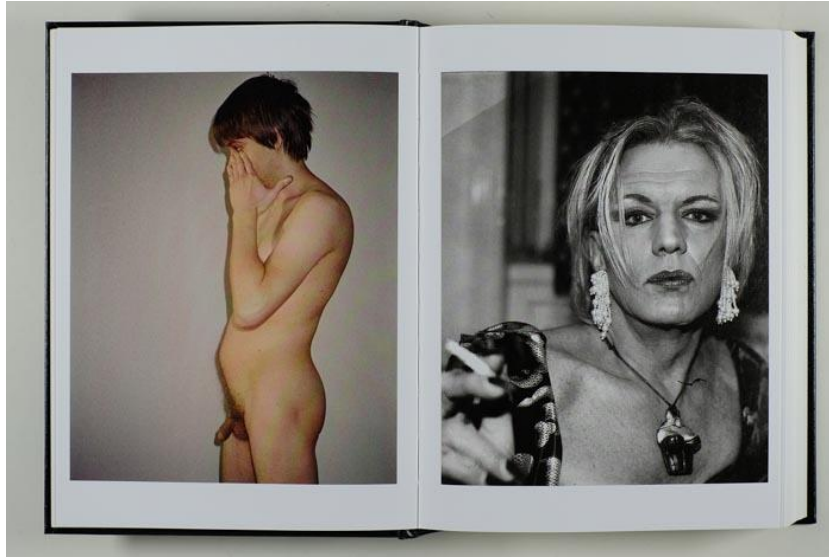
AP: PvK became more Portugal-centered than we had initially imagined because at some point we realized it was necessary to make good books by António Júlio Duarte, by André Cepeda, etc. There were Portuguese photographers who had excellent work but not good books. And we could do these books with and for them.

JB: You started to feel responsible for publishing good quality books by Portuguese photographers...

AP: Yes, it almost became a mission for us. There was good photography in Portugal, but no good photography publishers. That said, we never really stopped being a cosmopolitan publisher with a strong presence abroad, in book fairs, etc.

JPC: We were always abroad and in regular contact with people like Alec Soth, Paul Graham, Paul Kooiker... These are people who know our books well. There was always a dialogue with foreign artists and publishers. But it's true that, due to the context we just described, we gave precedence to doing books by Portuguese artists.

In fact, that is also one of the reasons why we try to keep regular contact with people outside Portugal, so these artists can be well-known and appreciated abroad.



JH Engström, *The Frame*

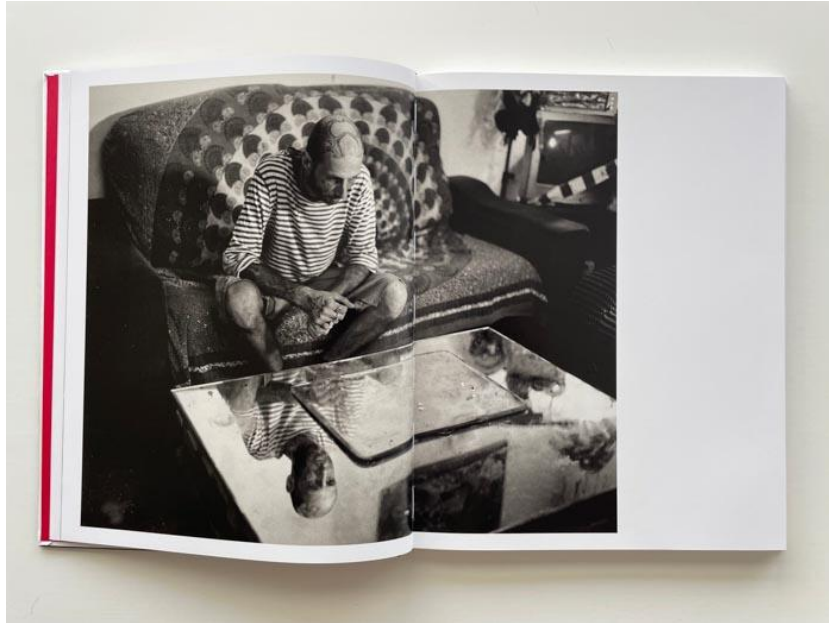
AP: Still, we are always open to work with foreign artists, as you mentioned. Above all, we strive to maintain a strong and coherent editorial identity. A photographer like Engström makes perfect sense in our catalog. There is a strong affinity between us. Currently, we are working on a book by Bernard Plossu on Portugal and another by Wang Bing on China... These are foreign artists very well-known internationally. But it makes sense for us to publish their work in PvK, and so we will do it, regardless of where they come from.

However, we would also like to contribute to the creation of a new Portuguese generation of photographers. One of the last books we published, *A Zona*, by Diogo Simões, just got a good review in *Les Inrockuptibles*, by Philippe Azoury. Up until now, we were the youngest generation of Portuguese photographers. We have been the “Portuguese young artists”, but we are well over 40 now... So that must stop.

JB: How do you see the new Portuguese generation of photographers? In a way, this generation lives under your shadow.

AP: Yes, probably. It is what it is. We also grew under the shadow of Paulo Nozolino, for example. But in the end, I think that Pierre von Kleist is a good artistic parent to have...

JPC: Nowadays, there are many photography schools. I, myself, teach occasionally. And as far as the photobook is concerned, it became part of the photography curricula after the “photobook boom”. And this is positive, but we must not forget that a good photobook only exists if there are good photographs in it. It is important for young artists to realize that it is very sexy to have their first book — a kind of visiting card — but the really hard work will be constructing a solid and serious body of work.



Diogo Simões, *A Zona*

AP: I think the new generations are quite different from ours, and it couldn't be otherwise, since the world has changed. We needed the book format to show new work, we needed it for our new work to circulate. There was a certain urgency. At that time, what legitimized the work of a young photographer was not the book, but an exhibition. The first solo exhibition was the big milestone. Today, the first book is often the most desired milestone. And it can be, indeed, the most important. If fifteen years ago the book was punk, now it is academic. In the old days, you studied photography almost without talking about books. Today, as José Pedro said, the book has an important place within the curricula. It has become academic. A certain spontaneity has been lost. Young people today are taking photographs “for their first book”, developing a “project” which will be transformed into a book. It all became more conventional, less spontaneous.

JB: Do you think that the photobook is turning into a fetish object?

AP: Yes. Some spontaneity was lost. The book lost its vital lightness, it has become a heavy thing. The new generation frequently thinks of photobooks in an academic way. Books are no longer an exciting, punk thing.

JB: How do you make decisions regarding the material dimension of the books?

AP: At Pvk, we are self-taught designers. We are mainly interested in the dramaturgical aspect of the books. We construct them according to how we want them to be read. For example, some of my books follow the format of musical scores — I made this decision at some point when I was starting to think about making them. But at the time I didn't really know how to materialize this idea into physical objects. So I started doing research, buying musical scores, etc. And I learned how to make the book as I had previously imagined it, how I wanted it to exist as an object.

When we were working with António Júlio Duarte's in his first book with us, *White Noise*, he told us that his first contact with photography was through the covers of vinyl records. That is the reason why we decided that the format of the book would follow vinyl covers.



António Júlio Duarte, *White Noise*

JB: Coming back to the photobook as perhaps a fetish object... How do you perceive the community that has been built around it? Who buys photobooks? There seems to be a relatively broad community, but a closed community at the same time.

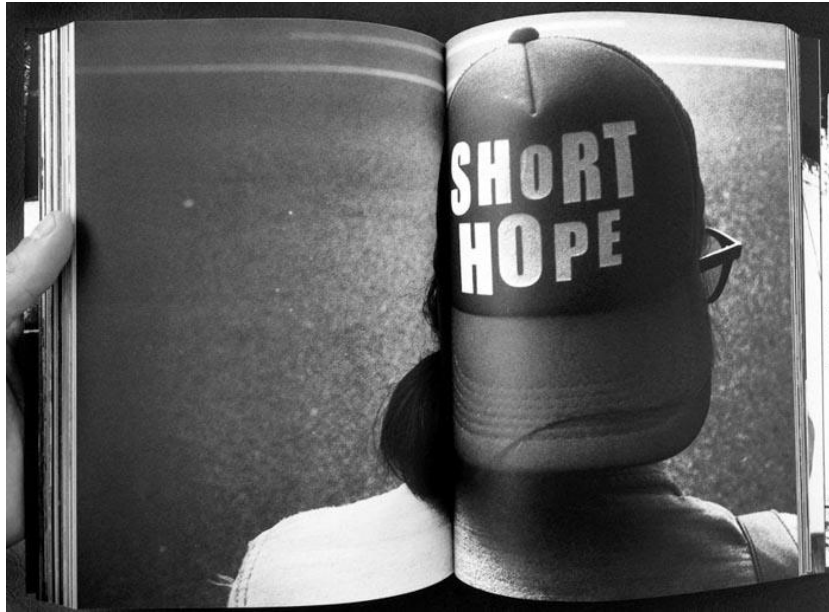
AP: Yes, we talk about that a lot. There is a kind of “ghetto”, isn’t there? I believe that there is no community these days. The photobook community is over.

JB: In what regards criticism, or reception, for example, there are very few places where photobooks are talked about. Even inside academia there is clearly a gap. In the general press, photobooks are almost absent. This is strange because, in the photography world, everybody is talking about photobooks, but in the outside world it seems that nobody talks about photobooks, or even knows about it.

AP: The community as it existed in the early years failed. We used to compare photobooks with documentaries. Photography should have a public interest. We should get out of the ghetto and become mainstream. Because if the work is about the world, photobooks must communicate with the world. However, that communication with the outside world didn’t happen, unfortunately. The ghetto got bigger, it started to accommodate more and more people, but it didn’t stop being a ghetto. Our generation wanted to go from photobooks to the world, but the new generations seem to desire the opposite movement. There was an implosion.

JB: Maybe the photobook became so autonomous, so closed in on itself, so institutionalized as an artform, that it ended up losing a certain direct connection with life. This is something that remains very strong in the Japanese photobook, for example, where there is less this idea of a photobook corresponding to a “photographic project”, as José Pedro mentioned earlier. In Japan, books seem to be

usually born from a strong relationship with life. Photography is mainly a mediator in this relation. In fact, the film you [André Príncipe] directed with Marco Martins, *Traces of a Diary* (2011), centers on this question.



André Príncipe & Marco Martins, *Tokyo Diaries*

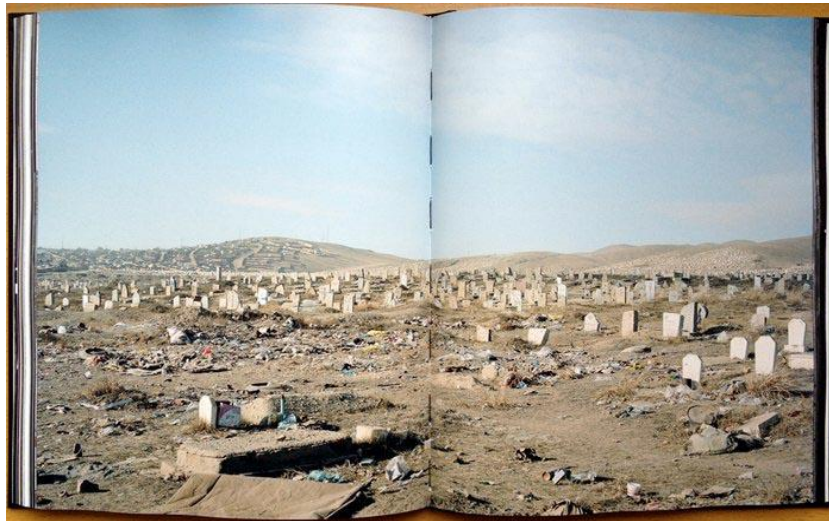
AP: Maybe this is because Japan has a long tradition of this specific practice of photography and the photobook. There hasn't been a "photobook boom" in Japan in recent years like there has been here. There was continuity. In Japan the photobook exists in a more integrated way, perhaps. There is also a huge professionalization, as you know. There are photographers, editors, book designers, but all this division of labor exists in an organic way, without hysteria or fetishization. The relation is somewhat more grounded.

JPC: I believe that in Japan the relationship with art and life is perceived differently. In Japan, the level of abstraction accepted in photography is higher. The audience adheres to that sometimes higher level abstraction. They think about life differently, and therefore the work develops differently. Here, the more a photographer pulls to the side of abstraction and life, and the less they provide context and explanation for the work, the less the audience adheres to it. In the Western world, the more you define the work, the easier it is for it to circulate and communicate. And, well, you need an audience... The less you work on behalf of the audience, the harder it is for them to see and appreciate your work. But this is how the world works. This also happens in cinema, for example: there are the blockbusters, and then there is Pedro Costa... All artists want to reach as many people as possible, but there are artists who only want to reach the people who are available to truly think about their work.

And photobooks must also promote this kind of relation. It's not like the kids' sticker books. Now [December 2022] World Cup 2022 is taking place, and you have the World Cup sticker book. You collect the stickers, and then the World Cup ends and the sticker book loses its value... It shouldn't be like that with books. They must

stamp their mark on people. This is truly important for us as publishers. Maybe some of our books have a hard time circulating, reaching a wider audience, because we resist linearity, easy reading, explanation. But we do it the way we believe we should do it, and that's the important thing.

However, it is true that, for a publisher to survive, the books must circulate. Digital transformations, such as streaming, have helped the more “difficult” cinema to circulate, but that didn't happen in the same way with photography books. You see the pictures on the internet, and that may even make fewer people buy the books, since they see the pictures on the internet and are satisfied with that. They have the pictures, so they don't need the book. It's hard to fight that.



André Príncipe, *Smell of Tiger Precedes Tiger*

AP: I agree. On the other hand — and this, perhaps, is very personal — I feel that these days it is important that we learn to do things without being obsessed with reception and the audience, to do things as if we were alone, without trying to communicate with the audience in a direct or easy way. And this does not mean to have disdain for the audience. On the contrary, it means that the commitment to the medium as an artform must become even stronger. The photobook has become a kind of uninteresting, too “tidy”, easy thing, while before, again, it was exciting. As a publisher or as an artist, you felt passion for the book, you wanted to give it to the world, to defend it passionately, to talk about it with other people. Since the market today is kind of saturated, the community has imploded. There is a lot of noise but there seems to be little conversation. We need less noise and more conversation.

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