Photobooks

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1223>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1223

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2006

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Nathalie Boulouch, « Photobooks », *Critique d'art* [Online], 27 | Printemps 2006, Online since 13 February 2012, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1223> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1223

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

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REFERENCES

Le Livre de photographies : une histoire, vol. 1, Paris : Phaidon, 2005

Roni Horn: Index Cixous, Göttingen : Steidl, 2005

- 1 Is it the presence of photography books among contemporary artist production that has led to an interest in something that, for many years, remained limited to what Shelley Rice very aptly described as a “secret story buried in the famous chronologies of photographic history”?¹ Whatever the reason, photobooks have been the subject of a number of major exhibitions and publications² in recent years.
- 2 The book by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger is part of this process, and embodies an ambitious and much broader synthesis, due to be continued in a second volume, and to cover some 450 photobooks in all. Unlike previous volumes, which focused exclusively on the 20th century, this one is a historical survey that starts with the invention of the medium. The first volume breaks down into nine thematic and chronological chapters, covering an international selection of photography books, from the first examples published in the 19th century to Japanese photobooks published since World War II. The book design uses all the strengths of Phaidon’s previous outings in this genre, with high production values enhancing their status as objects: when closed, a slight cast shadow highlights the cover; when open, the same effect underscores the qualities of the layout and encourages the reader to imagine an active role in the perception of the image. Each photobook is preceded by a detailed descriptive and historical note.
- 3 But what is a “photobook”? According to the criteria put forward, it is a “statement”, articulated by a visual intelligence, which proposes the narrative exploration of a theme. The term is used in the generic sense here, encompassing a wide range of supports and an extensive typology. The examples are assembled in such a way as to show how this means of disseminating photographs came to constitute a form of which it is appropriate to

write the history. As the introductory texts to *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* by Anna Atkins (1843-1853) and *The Pencil of Nature* by William Henry Fox Talbot (1844-1846) aptly remind us, photography has always been linked to the book form. From the prints glued into the first, limited-edition albums to the half-tone engravings for the mass market, the history of published photography is closely tied to that of the technological and industrial improvements in photomechanical printing processes. It is also inseparable from its conditions of production. The chapter on modernist photography books identifies a moment when a form was invented in which photography, typography and graphic design were inextricably joined. This is no doubt the least surprising section, whereas the sections on propaganda photobooks and Japanese albums offer their fair share of revelations.

- 4 In the introduction, Gerry Badger argues that the photobooks of the 19th century have an objectivist approach reflecting the prevailing positivist conception of photography as utilitarian and documentary, whereas subjectivity is given greater prominence in those of the 20th. This raises a distinction that this book does not address, between books of photographs and photographers' books³, in which the author takes a manifestly personal approach. Roni Horn's *Index Cixous*, published recently by Gerhard Steidl, is a good example of the latter. The artist uses the photobook to create a space of emotional proximity for the reader as they leaf at their chosen speed through this series of full-frame close-ups of Hélène Cixous's face. Horn plays on the sequence effect, inserting breaks in the form of white pages, mixing black-and-white prints with colour ones. This is a sensitive photographic portrait that magnificently illustrates the convergence of an artistic project and the credo of a publisher for whom "making a book is a personal act."⁴
- 5 One could say that there is also something personal in Parr and Badger's book. For while it has all the obligatory references, there are also one or two finds that reflect their own interests as collectors: witness, for example, *The Book of Bread*, published by Owen Simmons in 1903, whose systematic cross sections of loaves have a kind of pre-conceptualist protocol, or the extraordinary *122 Colour Photographs* published in 1948 by the Danish photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen, with colour reproductions conveying an aesthetic approach and interest in the banal and the everyday that would characterise the work of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore some twenty years later, and more recently, have inspired Martin Parr.
- 6 "Photobooks have fascinated me for years, and this book [...] bears witness to my obsession" (p. 4). What more need be said? While this book certainly constitutes an essential reference—both the richest and the most diverse work on the question—it is of also of interest because this ensemble, a considerable part of which comes from Parr's own personal collection, takes us back to the visual sources of this artist for whom the book medium represents an important aspect of his work as well as a means of disseminating it.

NOTES

1. Rice, Shelley. "When Objects Dream," *The Book of 101 Books. Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth-Century*, Andrew Roth (ed.), New York: PPP Editions in association with Roth Horowitz LLC, 2001, p. 3.
2. In particular *Fotografia Publica. Photography in Print 1919-1939*, Horacio Fernandez (ed.), Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia/Aldeasa, 1999; *Kiosk. Eine Geschichte der Fotoreportage*, Bodo von Dewitz (ed.), Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2001; *The Book of 101 Books. Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth-Century*, Andrew Roth (ed.), *op. cit.*
3. This is what Philippe Arbaïzar set out to do in "Le livre de photographe", *Les Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne* (Paris), #81, autumn 2002, p. 36-61.
4. Gerhard Steidl quoted in Claire Guillot, "Gerhard Steidl, éditeur haute couture", *Le Monde* (Paris), 24 February 2006, p. 18. I would like here to pay tribute to the remarkable work done by this publisher, who has just brought out a book by Ed Ruscha, *Then and Now*.