

# The Example of Photography in Print and Circulation — On the Historiography of Photography, Artistic Research and the Multidisciplinary and Practice- based Perspective

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# The Example of Photography in Print and Circulation—On the Historiography of Photography, Artistic Research and the Multidisciplinary and Practice-based Perspective.

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Photography has rarely had a particularly prominent position in the discipline of art history. There are several reasons for this, including hierarchies between established forms of expression such as painting and sculpture and newer media, as well as the difficulties of dealing with the breadth and heterogeneity of photography - photography exists in an almost incalculable number of contexts, most of which are far from the domain of art history. Knowledge of photography and its history has therefore often been formulated in completely different areas. Many of the contributions come from the fields of literature, philosophy and sociology, but also from media and communication studies. Several of the classic texts were written in the interwar period, such as Walter Benjamin's essay "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie", originally published in the literary journal *Die Literarische Welt* No. 38, 1931, or Lucia Moholy's *A Hundred Years of Photography 1839–1939*, published by Penguin Books in London in 1939. Like many others interested in the history of photography, she was herself a practising photographer, as was her husband Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, who published *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* as early as 1925. The book was number 8 in the Bauhaus series and, in line with the school's educational and aesthetic ideals, it had an interdisciplinary and practical perspective. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy emphasises the relationships between the artistic forms of expression and looks more at the contemporary and future use of photography than at history. The historical, but also the social perspective, is however strongly present in the photographer Gisele Freund's doctoral thesis in sociology from 1936: *La photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle*. It was later published in a revised edition entitled *Photographie et Société* (1974), which was translated into a number of languages. Freund was strongly influenced by Benjamin's thoughts on the role and place of photography in the age of mechanical reproduction, as was the artist and writer John Berger and

his work *Ways of Seeing*. First presented as a BBC television programme in 1973, it was published in book form the following year. Moving between painting, photography and society, Berger is particularly interested in the male gaze and the function of the image in the capitalist economy. Among the most influential texts on photography are, of course, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) and Vilém Flusser's *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (1983)—all written by people rooted primarily in literature and philosophy. In Sontag's case, the book is a collection of essays originally published in the *New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1977. It was also in the 1970s and 1980s that a more critical reflection on photography took shape, and several of the most important contributions were produced by photographers and artists, including Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, whose artistic works and texts - such as "in around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)" and "The Body and the Archive" - have been crucial in problematising the history and contemporary application of documentary photography in particular.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the multi-disciplinary perspective, the history of photography is also characterised by its strong links to institutions that collect and exhibit photography. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has a special position among the institutions that contributed early on to the knowledge of the history of photography. Two years before the centenary of photography, Beaumont Newhall, the museum's librarian, was commissioned by the museum's director Alfred Barr to compile the exhibition *Photography 1839–1937*. The following year, a revised version of the catalogue was published: *Photography: A Short Critical History*. Newhall, who had been appointed Curator of the then established Department of Photography in 1940, further developed the second version and in 1949 *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* was published. The book has since been published in numerous editions - most recently in 2010. After more than fifteen years, Beaumont Newhall left MoMA and from 1947 the Department of Photography was headed first by the photographer Edward Steichen, and between 1962 and 1991 by John Szarkowski, who was also a photographer. It was mainly under Szarkowski's leadership that the institution's modernist approach to photography and its history was formulated in exhibitions such as *The Photographer's Eye* (1964), *Looking at Photographs* (1973) and *Photography Until Now* (1990). The dominant position and influence of the museum on photography has been analysed by the critic Christopher Phillips in the essay "The Judgment Seat of Photography", first published in the journal *October* 1982 (Vol. 22), and has since been central to the awareness of the power of institutions over the writing of photographic history.<sup>2</sup>

1 Martha Rosler's and Allan Sekula's texts are published in Bolton, Richard, ed., *The Contest of Meaning. Critical Histories of Photography*.

2 Christopher Phillips text is published in Bolton, Richard, ed., *The Contest of Meaning. Critical Histories of Photography*.

Even private collectors without the backing of major institutions have made significant contributions to knowledge of the history of photography. This is particularly true of the German-born photographer Helmut Gernsheim and his wife Alison, who together published *The History of Photography* in 1955 by Oxford University Press. The couple had acquired their knowledge by actively collecting large amounts of historical photography, but also cameras, photo books and documents in the form of letters and notes related to individual photographers. The extensive collection, including the world's oldest surviving photograph, was sold in 1963 to the University of Texas, Austin, where it became the basis for the photography collection at the Harry Ransom Centre.<sup>3</sup> But Gernsheim's story also has links to Sweden, demonstrating the connections between tendencies at the centre of the photography world and a national context on its periphery. Gernsheim negotiated with several institutions when the collection was to be sold, including in Sweden. However, no agreement was reached, but in 1964 the Swedish state acquired Gernsheim's duplicate collection instead. It became one of the cornerstones of a department at Moderna Museet in Stockholm which - inspired by MoMA in New York - was established in 1971 and called the Photographic Museum. The other cornerstone is Professor Helmer Bäckström's collection of historical photography and literature. From the 1920s until his death in 1964, Mr Bäckström was a key figure in photographic culture in Sweden. He became the first professor of photography at the Royal Institute of Technology in 1948 and - in addition to the collection and Bäckström's international network - his many articles on the history of photography in Sweden and the other Nordic countries were pioneering work.<sup>4</sup> In the subsequent generation of Swedish photographic historians, Rune Hassner stands out. He belonged to the group of young photographers who, after the war, travelled to Europe - particularly Paris - and embraced the new pictorial styles of the time. In addition to his work as a photographer reporting on his travels in Africa, Central America, India and China, among other places, which were published in books and international journals, he also had an institutional and academic career - although, like many photographers, he had no formal training. Like John Berger, Rune Hassner used television to popularise the subject of photo history and in the 1970s created a series of programmes on socially engaged photojournalism for Swedish Television. He specialised in reproduced photography and his greatest work, *Images for Millions* (1977), deals with the history of mass-produced photography and the emergence of photo magazines. Hassner was one of the founders of the European Society for the History of Photography in 1978, and in 1983 became the first head of the newly established School of Photography at the University of Gothenburg. He remained there until 1988

3 Flukinger, *The Gernsheim Collection*.

4 Tellgren, "Fotografi och konst. Om Moderna Museets samling av fotografi ur ett institutionshistoriskt perspektiv", 121-152.

when he was appointed founding director of the Hasselblad Centre—two institutions of particular importance to the research environment soon to be presented.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the introductory presentation of previous contributions to the history of photography - from Walter Benjamin to Rune Hassner—is to show that the practice-based and multidisciplinary perspective is not something new or unusual, but rather constitutes a foundation and an engine of reflection on photography and its history, or rather histories in the plural. The aim is also to highlight how this tradition connects to the practice-based research field that has emerged in higher art education in Europe over the last two decades or so. Compared to many other disciplines, artistic research is relatively young and still controversial. The debates include the view of knowledge and what counts as research, but also the risks of art being forced into academic and bureaucratic structures that critics say are alien to art.<sup>6</sup> Much has happened, however, and there are now several reasons to emphasise artistic research as an increasingly established field with both specific postgraduate programmes in a number of artistic subjects and a growing senior research environment with international networks and journals, such as the Society for Artistic Research, *Journal of Artistic Research*, *Pars Journal*, *VIS—Nordic Journal of Artistic Research* and *L'Internationale Online*. For photography research, which already had a strong practice-based orientation, artistic research has given the subject a stronger institutional anchorage and completely different opportunities in terms of funding, publication and collaboration with other disciplines. One example is the photographic and lens media research environment that has emerged with the Hasselblad Foundation and the School of Photography (now part of HDK-Valand). Over the past ten years, the collaboration has resulted in three major research projects: *Watched! Surveillance, Art and Photography*; *Photography in Print and Circulation* and *Thresholds. Interwar Lens Media Cultures 1919–1939*. In addition to the latter involving both photography and film, the project was also a collaboration with GPS 400, a centre for collaborative visual research at the University of Gothenburg.

The shared resources of the research environment have made it possible to involve qualified people from different disciplines, and to conduct and present the research through seminars, exhibitions and publications. The projects relate to and build on previous research in their respective fields, and the aim has been both to contribute new knowledge about the subject and to develop curatorial research methods. In the project highlighted here, *Photography in Print and Circulation*, the starting point was the

5 Knape, “Allt blev inte riktigt som vi tänk oss”, 133–170; Gunnarsson, “The Hasselblad Center at Wernerska villan”, 127–161.

6 For the discussion about artistic research see for example: Nyberg & Östlind, *Konstens kunskap/Knowledge of Art*.

change in both the photographic field and the writing of photographic history that took place in the early 2000s. The underlying reason for the shift was that the book had become an increasingly important medium for many photographers, which also inspired increased reflection on the significance of the photobook in both contemporary and historical terms. An early and important contribution was Andrew Roth's *The Book on 101 Books. Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (2001), which, as its title suggests, presents a canon of the most ground-breaking photographic books published in the twentieth century. The focus was clearly shifted from the individual photographers' images to the interaction between image, design, typography, print quality, paper and binding that characterises the photographic book. What was judged above all was the overall impact of the book and its quality as an aesthetic, material and communicative object. Andrew Roth, like many of those who took an early interest in photobooks, is a collector and dealer. It was in this group, and among the photographers themselves, that the interest in and knowledge of the photobook existed. Roth was also involved in one of the first exhibitions on the history of the photobook: *The Open Book: A History of Photographic Books from 1878 to the present*. It took place at the Hasselblad Centre in 2004 and was based on Roth's book, but also included examples from the 19th century. The selection team included several key figures in print media and photography: Ingrid Sischy, Christoph Schifferli, Gerhard Steidl, Ute Eskilsen and the fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld, who at the time had one of the world's foremost collections of photography books. The exhibition was initiated and the work was led by the curator at the Hasselblad Centre, the photographer Hasse Persson, who also edited the exhibition catalogue. The idea of the project is formulated in the catalogue's afterword and the focus is on collecting: “It is my hope and ambition that our joint efforts in this work will create a lifelong interest in the connoisseurship of collecting photographic books.”<sup>7</sup>

In the same year that *The Open Book* was exhibited, the first volume of *The Photobook: A History* (2004) by photographers and collectors Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, was published. It was soon followed by two more equally comprehensive volumes in 2006 and 2014. Compared to both *The Book on 101 Books* and *The Open Book*, Parr and Badger broaden and deepen the scope in terms of time, theme and geography. Not only is the number of books significantly higher, but the authors highlight publications and genres that are not the most obvious examples of photo books, but in which photographic images play a prominent role. These include, for example, political propaganda, cook books and advertising. Both the overview, the selection and how the books are placed in a broader photo-historical context required knowledge that few others had at the time. In the preface to the first volume, Parr and Badger also speak of their work as an activist act, where photographers take control of the writing of history and contribute

7 Persson, *The Open Book. A History of the Photographic Book from 1873 to the Present*, 422.

empirical data, perspectives and knowledge that has neither interested nor existed in academic research in particular.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst *The Photobook: A History* covers a range of geographical areas, in many countries there was much more to highlight than could be accommodated in the three volumes. In the years that followed, a number of photobook histories were published that are clearly inspired by Parr and Badger, but where the selection has a national or regional delimitation: *The Latin American Photobook* (2011), *The Dutch Photobook* (2012), *Photobooks Spain 1905–1977* (2014) *Swiss Photobooks from 1927 to the Present* (2012), *The Chinese Photobook from the 1900s to the Present* (2016) and *Una Revisión al Fotolibro Chileno* (2018) - to name a few. Swedish photobook publishing is represented in the surveys by a few well-known titles: *Byn med det blå huset* (1959) by Sune Jonsson, *Poste Restante* (1967) by Christer Strömholm, *Café Lehmitz* (1978) by Anders Petersen and *Landet utom sig* (1993) by Lars Tunbjörk, which meant that here too there was a need for a broader analysis. The initial idea of the research project was to examine the national context but at the same time to consider the Swedish photobook scene in a broader international perspective. In addition to *The Open Book*, the research project was able to build on an earlier joint work on the photobook that in 2013 resulted in the publication *Imprint. Visual Narratives in Books and Beyond* - with contributions from Garry Badger, photographer Bettina Lockemann and publisher and designer Michael Mack.

In order to get a better overview of the current state of research and to establish new contacts, Photography in Print and Circulation was launched with two international symposia featuring Lars Willumeit, Charlotte Cotton and Frits Gierstberg, among others. Of the many surveys and exhibitions on photobooks produced after *The Photobook: A History*, one project in particular stood out: *Photobook Phenomenon*, which was shown at the CCCB and Foto Colectania in Barcelona in 2017. Rather than establishing a canon, or inventorying and highlighting the publication of photobooks in a specific country, the project highlighted the role and importance of the photobook within contemporary visual culture. The curatorial team consisted of key figures in the photobook world, including Irene Mendoza, Moritz Neumüller and Horacio Fernández. Their approach encouraged us to formulate questions that increase knowledge about what could be called the internal culture of the photobook. Starting from the practice-based and curatorial perspective, we focused on the competences, people and networks that make the photobook possible, but also on phenomena that arise or are strengthened by the publication of photobooks. The study's emphasis on the social dimension of the photobook meant that the project was theoretically linked to and inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT). For Latour, the actual and multifaceted interplay between

different actors is crucial to the interpretation of a specific field or professional culture. What also made ANT relevant in this context is that the theory also radically includes non-human actors in the social field, which usefully encapsulates and highlights the agency of the photo book and the fact that the book as an object is more than the sum of its parts.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the project was an exhibition. The choice to work with curatorial methods meant that the exhibition medium was not only used to present the final result, but primarily functioned as a research tool to collect, process and interpret the empirical material.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition thus became a spatial montage that both created and visualised connections, overlays and displacements, which in this case highlighted the photo book as a complex material and social phenomenon. The aim of the exhibition was to explore how the photobook is the result of a series of converging competences, different aesthetic and conceptual ideas and expressions, and - not least - how it is part of and shaped by different types of contexts and circulations. With the exhibition as a research tool, the physical books were also given a completely different presence than what is possible with other, more traditional methods. Placed next to each other, the materiality and agency of the books established relationships between the objects that would not otherwise occur. A decision made early in the process was that visitors would be able to look at all the books included in the exhibition themselves, which meant that they would neither be displayed in glass cases nor fixed to the table. The tactile and intimate dimension is central to the book as an object, but in many exhibitions on the history of the photobook, visitors are limited to looking at the covers of the physical books. The content is usually conveyed in films where someone's hands flip through page after page, but even though it works surprisingly well and is informative, this form of mediation does not do justice to the multisensory qualities of the book.

The selection of books was a collective process involving many people, and of the nearly 400 books displayed in the exhibition *Published: Photography in Print and Circulation*, the majority were purchased from second-hand bookshops or directly by the photographers. The books were placed on specially designed tables with markings for each individual book. Visitors could stand at the table or take the book with them and sit at one of the exhibition's reading areas, and then return it to its place on the table. There were no guards in the room or alarms on the books and it was an experiment, but fortunately only one book disappeared during the entire exhibition period. It was a simple paperback from 1970: *China: The Revolution Goes On* by photographer Gun Kessle and author Jan Myrdal, and it was quickly supplemented by a copy purchased online for 20 kronor (about €2). It was rare for any of the books to cost more than a couple of

8 Badger & Parr, "Introduction. The Photobook: Between the Novel and Film", 6-11.

9 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

10 See for example: Bjerregaard, *Exhibitions as Research. Experimental Methods in Museums*.

hundred kronor (about €20). One consequence of the increased interest in photobooks, however, is that the value of individual titles - both historical and contemporary - has risen sharply, and for this reason we had to find another solution for those books that were too expensive or too fragile to be exposed freely. More than ten books were protected by plexiglass and displayed in a special section, including *Monographie illustrée du baleinoptère trouvée le 29 octobre 1865 sur la côte occidentale de Suède*. It is a zoological study of a blue whale stranded outside of Gothenburg and dissected by Professor August Wilhelm Malm. Published in 1867 in French, the book is one of the first with pasted photographs to be published in Sweden, and in terms of antiquarianism it attracts an international clientele and costs around 300 000 SEK (about €30 000). Behind the plexiglass were also a couple of thin books from around 2010. Published by young photographers in small editions, they exemplified the DIY spirit that is an important part of photo book culture. As well as solving a practical problem, we used the unusual presentation to highlight and problematise the economic side of photobook culture. Although the books were displayed behind glass, visitors were able to browse these titles as well, as we had ensured that two copies of the books were available. The second copy was kept at the Hasselblad Foundation's specialised library for photo books, which is located in the same building as the exhibition space. Anyone who wanted to could visit the library and look at the precious or fragile books with the help of librarian Elsa Modin. The library itself is one of the actors shaping the culture of photobooks and Elsa Modin played a central role in the curatorial team.

The third and final part of the project was the book: *Published: Photobooks in Sweden* (2019). The reason why it was published after the exhibition was to capture and utilise the experiences and knowledge generated by the curatorial work. As in the exhibition, the material is divided into three categories: Society, Self and Image. The categories did not exist from the beginning but emerged in the selection for the exhibition. The strength of the thematic division is that the individual books are placed in a broader context, and the tendencies and interests that characterise photo book culture become clearer. In the first category, Society, the books often have a documentary focus and depict social and political issues and challenges - not least in relation to work and housing. This was also the most common type of book. The second grouping, The Self, brings together books where the photographer is at the centre and where the work depicts the author's life and view of the world. There are links between the first and second categories, especially when the books deal with and explore identities of different kinds - national, sexual, class related - and where the idea of the personal being political plays an important role. The third category shifts the focus from society and the subject to the image, meaning that the books demonstrate a particular interest in photography as a medium and in the aesthetic expression of images, but also in the book as a material and expressive object. A notable difference between the different categories is

the extent and nature of the texts in the books. In the case of society, the text constitutes a large part of the content and deals with the subject of the book and usually has an explanatory and contextualising function. The texts in the "I" category are written by an author or curator and focus on the photographer's ability to imbue the images with personal expression, but may also be written by the photographer himself, often in the form of notes or diaries. The books in the Image category tend to have the shortest texts and their style and content are both more poetic and theoretical than the texts in the other categories. Moreover, it is only in this category that in many cases the books have no text at all, which is based on the idea that the images speak for themselves.

The method used to investigate the social dimension was primarily the qualitative and semi-structured interview, and *Published: Photobooks in Sweden* contains interviews with ten selected individuals. They represent different professional competences involved in the production and distribution of photobooks: in addition to photographers, designers, authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, curators, critics and collectors. The interviews revolve around questions about their professional relationship with and views on photobooks, and the conversations reveal the actors' specific motivations, knowledge and experiences. It is striking that the interviewees often move between different professional roles. Most of them have some form of photographic practice and it is not uncommon for them to run a publishing house - alone or together with others. Several testify that the practical difficulties do not lie primarily in making the books but in distribution and sales. In various ways, the interviews reveal the web of relationships, collaborations and dependencies that largely characterise photobook culture, where, among other things, the exchange of books and services plays a central role in what can be described in terms of an informal economy. The places and platforms where photobooks are displayed, sold and discussed have generally emerged in a DIY spirit and in networks that are locally, nationally and globally rooted. It is characterised by actors helping each other to disseminate the books in different contexts and distribution channels, although there have also been changes in the culture of photobooks. In interviews, people who were already involved in the mid-2000s describe how the increasing influence of large commercial fairs and publishers has made it more difficult to maintain the informal and collegial spirit. Despite these challenges, self-organised and social forces have shown an ability to find new forms, as highlighted in the recently published anthology *Photography Bound: Reimagine Photobooks and Self-Publishing* (2023). Viewed from a historical perspective, contemporary photobook culture has created networks, contexts and publishing channels that have expanded and changed the photographic scene. What the study also reveals is how the circulation of photobooks both overlaps and exists alongside the institutions and galleries that have long dominated the photographic field. The shift from exhibiting to publishing books has made many photographers less dependent on other actors to

show their work. In addition, the combination of the photobook scene's own network of contacts and the use of global distributors, such as DHL, FedEx and others, allows books to reach a wider and more geographically dispersed audience than exhibitions traditionally can. Added to this is the potential of online publications and platforms—although the emphasis of photobook culture on the materiality of the book means that the web is used more as a channel for showcasing physical books than as a forum in its own right.

From the interviews—and the content of *Photography Bound: Reimagine Photobooks and Self-Publishing*—it is clear that in practice there is no contradiction between working with prints, exhibitions or books. However, one consequence of the developments of recent decades is that a change in the way photographic works are collected, preserved and displayed is required. If this does not happen, key elements of contemporary photographic culture will be missed by institutions. These issues become even more acute if you include the online photographic scene. For the art world, which is the context in which many photographic institutions operate, the idea of unique and valuable objects is crucial, but for a medium like photography, where multiplicity is a key characteristic, the emphasis on uniqueness is limiting. Despite the fact that signed and numbered prints are becoming a smaller and smaller part of photographic practice, photographic prints still play a crucial role for many photographic institutions, meaning that their exhibitions and purchases for their collections are becoming less and less representative of what is happening in photography today. The issue becomes even more pressing if one considers the—as already mentioned—importance of institutions in the history of photography. What institutions choose to display and collect affects not only perceptions of photographic culture today, but also how photographic history will be understood and described in the future. The challenges for institutions are twofold: redefining their selection criteria and priorities, and establishing a balance between emphasising the importance of published photography on the one hand, and avoiding making photobooks another fetish in the symbolic economy of the art field on the other.

What the example of *Photography in Print and Circulation* hopefully demonstrates—in addition to uncovering and analysing the social dimensions of photobook culture—are the points of contact between artistic research and photo history writing. Both are characterised by disciplinary heterogeneity and the use of practice-based knowledge and methods. This common ground means that the research environment that has been established within higher art education can offer a stronger institutional anchorage and more resources than the photography subject has previously had. What artistic research also enables is that the investigations are not only about photography, but that different photographic practices are also used and play a crucial role in the study of other subjects or issues. For example, within our research environment there is a strong link between

photography and environmental and climate research, but also between photography and what is called the political imaginary, i.e. conceptions and visualisations of possible presents and futures. The fact that this type of research project also provides a deeper understanding of photographic practice and its history makes it even more important.

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1. Documentation of the exhibition *Published. Photobooks in Sweden*, Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg, 2018
2. Documentation of the exhibition *Published. Photobooks in Sweden*, Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg, 2018
3. Documentation of the exhibition *Published. Photobooks in Sweden*, Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg, 2018
4. Documentation of the exhibition *Published. Photobooks in Sweden*, Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg, 2018

Photo: Cissi Sandblom/Hasselblad Center