

# PhotoResearcher

» I am shocked. « \*

\* Peter Turner on new photobooks  
*Creative Camera* 1/1989

The Reception  
of Photobooks

## Guest Editors

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**Gian Butturini: London by Gian Butturini**  
(1969/2017)

*Including conversations with*  
JORGE LUIS ÁLVAREZ PUPO  
and AZU NWAGBOGU

*Which pictures do I just glance at, which pictures are without consequence, which pictures do I look at time and time again, which pictures do I need to be able to live? Which pictures scream at me, and in which pictures does only the author scream? Which pictures have left their mark on me, which pictures can I not escape from? What does that all have to do with me?*

Wilhelm Schürmann, 1983<sup>1</sup>

A German-language specialist publication with the title of *Gedruckt und erblättert* (*Printed and leafed through*) that focused on *The Photobook as a Medium of Aesthetic Articulation since the 1940s* was issued in 2016 (\_\_\_ fig. 1). The anthology brought together a desideratum of 16 contributions that approached the object of investigation in a multi-perspectival fashion. The five editors already stressed the fact that the photobook is a virulent field of research in the history of art in their introduction: “This publication stands at the beginning of prospering photobook research and aims at making a contribution to a reappraisal of a pioneering photographic work and representation format.”<sup>2</sup> Programmatically, Steffen Siegel provided a multipart catalogue of measures that would characterise future photobook research in his introductory text to the volume.<sup>3</sup> The photo historian had already given a talk on this matter at the ESHPh symposium *Seiten, Blicke* (*Pages, Views*) held at the MUSA in Vienna on 10 June 2016 (\_\_\_ fig. 2). In this 35<sup>th</sup> number of the *PhotoResearcher*, we wish to add an additional aspect that has been largely ignored by the scientific side, and that we feel to be extremely substantial, to Siegel’s catalogue: that of the reception.

Our premise is based on the recognition that, to a large extent, the history of photography can be told as a history of reception. This is because only when photographic reproductions have found resonance in exhibitions and publications, and subsequently been subjected to a discursive discussion, can they become rel-

Gedruckt und erblättert

Das Fotobuch als Medium  
ästhetischer Artikulation seit  
den 1940er Jahren



fig. 1

Burcu Dogramaci et al., *Gedruckt und erblättert. Das Fotobuch als Medium künstlerischer Artikulation seit den 1940er Jahren*, Cologne 2016, cover.

1 \_\_\_ Wilhelm Schürmann, 'Was hat das alles mit mir zu tun?', in: *Einsichten-Aussichten. Vier Aspekte subjektiver Dokumentar fotografie*, exh. cat. Städtische Galerie Regensburg, Regensburg 1983, 8.

2 \_\_\_ Burcu Dogramaci, Désirée Dütter, Stefanie Dufhues, Maria Schindelegger, Anna Volz (eds.), 'Das Fotobuch als Medium künstlerischer Artikulation: zur

Einleitung', in: *Gedruckt und erblättert. Das Fotobuch als Medium ästhetischer Artikulation seit den 1940er Jahren*, Schriftenreihe des Studienzentrums zur Moderne – Bibliothek Herzog Franz von Bayern am Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, 3, Cologne 2016, 15.

3 \_\_\_ Steffen Siegel, 'Drucksache. Vorbemerkungen zu einer künftigen Fotobuch-Forschung', in: Dogramaci 2016 (reference 2), 22–33.





fig. 2  
*PAGES, VIEWS. Current Research on History and Trends of PHOTO|BOOK|ALBUM*, Conference of the European Society for the History of Photography (ESHP), in cooperation with the German Photographic Association (DGPh), MUSA, Vienna 10 June 2016. © Friedrich Schmidt, Vienna.

evant and invested with meaning for the public. And here – in addition to the means of application – it is mainly the forums of criticism that, as intermediary instances, generate discourses of this kind. In no way have photobooks been excluded from these receptive mechanisms, which were shaped by the analogue for so long.

The questions associated with a reception-based focus on photobooks are obvious. What was the basis when volumes with critical claims were inspected? Which specific media, content and forms did the reviewer focus on, and which were left out? To what extent were social discussions and discourses sparked or developed further? Which criteria or arguments were used or assumed for the evaluation or assessment? And last but not least: To which extent did the receptive ductus itself become an object of reflective perception of the photobook? The following contributions concern themselves with a catalogue of questions of this kind. Seven studies investigate a wide range of discourses and debates in a case-specific manner. Our authors consciously chose milestones from the history of photobooks whose influence on social conditions cannot be denied. However, the essays take different methodological approaches. The studies reveal that a certain moment of tension can be revealed precisely at the intersection of productive prescription and receptive interpretation that is well worth investigating. In conformance with Christoph Benjamin Schulz, photobooks articulate an “explicit awareness that the book not only subjects its content to the process of preparation and editing related to its publication, but also makes an entirely specific form of reception, which significantly influences the way in which the reader can appropriate its content, possible.”<sup>4</sup>

4 — Christoph Benjamin Schulz, *Poetiken des Blätterns, Literatur – Wissen – Poetik*, vol. 4, Monika Schmitz Means (ed.), Hildesheim, Zurich, New York 2015, 288.

### **Deep wounds**

In the first text, *Mariko Takeuchi* provides a profound analysis of the photobook *Hiroshima* by Ken Domon from the year 1958. The volume uncompromisingly visualises the late consequences of the devastating atomic bombing on 6 August 1945 that destroyed 80 per cent of the city and immediately robbed 80,000 people of their lives. Taking great care, Takeuchi uncovers the powerful conception of the book that follows the humane impulse of the photographer to overcome the collective trauma of war through an empathic *act of seeing*. Ken Domon's *Hiroshima* can be seen as a reminder and possibly also as the writing on the wall. In its function as a memorial, the book embodies a central category of photobook culture after 1945. An empathically focussed type of reception of pity is indelibly inscribed in it.

Robert Frank's *The Americans* has long been considered one of photography's great books of the century. The volume, which was first published in French by Robert Delpire in 1958, received its unmistakable formulation from the New York publishing house Grove Press one year later. Based on the exemplary initiatives produced by Frank's classic on the 50th anniversary of its publication, *Sophie Schäfer* poses the question of whether the scientific perspective on *The Americans* has actually been fully exhausted. The designer not only refers to various aspects of the physical appearance of the book that have, so far, only received marginal attention, but – for the first time – focuses on the factor of the virality from the digital perspective. The radius of the reception of Frank's work is reflected in the numerous editions and print runs of the volume that have been in circulation globally for almost 70 years. The author reconstructs the matrix of the publication and distribution processes of *The Americans* on a foil of a map of the world to provide a platform for clarifying the mythologisation of the work.

*Markus Schaden* also processes a topographical approach in his analysis of the reception of *Waffenruhe* a disparaging paperback book by Michael Schmidt that was published in 1987. Two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this book by the belligerent author-photographer from the Kreuzberg district of Berlin captured the doomsday mood of the divided metropolis that was his hometown. His radically subjective visual language emphatically irritated the contemporaries. An evaluation of the reviews of the book in the city, nation, and internationally proves that a trans-Atlantic distance was necessary to be able to fully appreciate the uncompromising new approach taken by *Waffenruhe*.

### **Neglect, minorities, taboos**

Hans Aarsman's landscape-format photobook *Hollandse Taferelen*, which was published in 1989, reveals a completely different form of radicality. When *Frits Gierstberg* sifted through the reactions in the Dutch daily press, his diagnosis was – in retrospect

– one of universally friendly helplessness. Reflexively, the reviews always referred to the photographer's personal disposition. Naturally, by doing so, they overlooked how Aarsman's subtle colour photographs were able to unite tendencies of American new-color photography with a fine sense of irony and pose the caustic question of the national identity in a deliberately restrained manner. In this respect, as far as the Netherlands is concerned, *Hollandse Taferelen*, represents a failure on the part of the critics.

Sometimes, it takes decades for the enormous force of a photobook to be fully felt. This applies to *Adam's Apple*, a celebrated long-term documentary work made by the Chilean photographer Paz Errázuriz that was published in book form in 1990 and illustrates the lives of male sex workers and transvestites in the brothels of Santiago and Talca during the Pinochet dictatorship. As a result of the Corona pandemic, *Luis Weinstein* did not have access to the libraries of the country. For that reason, he used the method of 'oral history' in his search for traces to interview witnesses of the period who had worked on the realisation of the photobook on Zoom. Their impressive narratives in *Adam's Apple* also talk about resistance and struggles and, in the aftermath, reveal how greatly the values and perceptions of books and images can change over time.

This definitely also applies to *The Silence*, a photobook by the French MAGNUM photographer Gilles Peress, that reached the public in 1995 and made the western world open its eyes to a political taboo theme in an almost unbearable manner: the genocide that had taken place in Rwanda in 1994. *Christoph Schaden* is able to show how – in the reviews in the German cultural environment – a new discourse over the dilemma of seeing and speaking developed out of a moment of shock. For the very first time in Germany, the focus of criticism was transferred from photographic images, over the conception, to the singular mediality of the book itself.

Finally, in the last contribution, *Moritz Neumüller* tackles one of the cases of our digitally-influenced present that set off a mighty tremor in the international cultural world. Here, a photobook acted as the trigger for an escalation that took place over the social media. We are speaking about *London by Gian Butturini*, a highly-charged photobook by the Brescian photographer and designer, first published in 1969. Some five years ago, Marin Parr proposed a reprint of the book, which had long been out of print. In late May 2019, the renowned British photographer and photobook collector suddenly saw himself confronted with an accusation of perpetuating racist tropes when the black student Mercedes Baptiste Halliday posted a tweet drawing attention to a combination of motifs on a double-page spread in the book that she felt were offensive and hurtful. The controversy that ensued in the social media was not without consequences. In the end, *London by Gian Butturini* was taken off the market by the Italian

Damiani publishing house in the summer of 2020, and Parr resigned as Director of the Bristol Photo Festival. The debate is still smouldering.

This affair marked a paradigm shift in the area of photo, media, and image research. For the first time in the history of photography, social-media instruments massively intervened in the reception of a photobook. Based on a profound analysis of the sources, and taking both the original 1969 edition, as well as the reprint, of *London by Gian Butturini* into consideration, Neumüller reconstructs the various stages of the digitally influenced, debate in his essay. In addition to written sources, he draws on numerous statements made by those involved and experts who he interviewed – by telephone, email, and zoom – over the past months. Although, unfortunately all of the people involved in the debate did not make themselves available, the reactions reflect an extremely multifaceted, heterogenic spectrum of perceptions and positions. Also in connection with how the photobook should be dealt with in future. The debate definitely needs to be continued.

The background and timing of this conflict are in no way coincidental. The problem of smouldering racism has long made its way into the consciousness of the cultural sector. Together with the editors of this issue of the *PhotoResearcher*, Moritz Neumüller decided to include two extensive interviews – one with the Cuban photographer Jorge Luis Álvarez Pupo who lives in Antwerp, and the other with the Nigerian curator Azu Nwagbogu – in his analysis. Their comments make it clear that structural and personal changes, in the sense of more diversity, are also necessary in the international photo scene. And, in connection with this, the necessity of coming closer together and listening to each other.

Taken as a whole, the case studies in this issue of *PhotoResearcher* impressively document that the receptive factor is what actually represents the dynamic instance of our photobook culture. This respect as well would make it worthwhile to increasingly focus on the reception of photobooks in future research. Especially, when we hear “I am shocked” once again.

Markus and Christoph Schaden, Ulla Fischer-Westhauser, Uwe Schögl  
Vienna, April 2021