

## **The artists' book, the photobook and the photo: a spectral approach by Dr Doug Spowart**

*NOTE: Books referenced in this paper are held by the State Library of Queensland*

The definition of photobook today could include a roughly printed or photocopied zine-like object created by a child, to a blatantly over-designed limited edition book. In between these bookends lies a range of products: Print-on-demand and hand-made unique state, small editions, self-published or bespoke books, ephemeral items, newspapers, pamphlets and zines. Although many of these published forms may not have the universal distribution and commercial opportunities afforded a trade published book, they are, none the less, part of the broad practice of the contemporary photobook. Additionally many of these books occupy much of the emergent contemporary scene and tend to be overlooked as the critical discussion is usually focussed on the photobook exemplars from the past.

The boundaries of the photobook discipline are blurred by their intersection with a variety of other book genres including the expansive mediums of artists' books and zines. As independent publishers of books, artists have for over 100 years communicated their ideas and stories using their chosen media in book form. Artists have embraced photography and the various forms of photography from found collaged photos, to screen-printing, photo etching and gravure, as well as actual silver gelatin, type C, inkjet or laser prints in their artists' book works. Anne Thurmann-Jajes commented in the catalogue for *ars photographica*, an exhibition about artists and photographers and their photobooks, that: 'In very general terms, it is possible to say that half of all artists' books produced to date have been based on photographs' (Thurmann-Jajes 2002:19). For that reason any discussion of the photobook needs to consider a broader range of contributors to the discipline as well as other forms of the book where photographs act as carrier of the visual communiqué.

In her essay Thurmann-Jajes also comments on the differences that she felt existed between the artist and the photographer in conceptual aspects of making a photobook. She states that:

The authors of photo books followed photographic tradition, according to which the photograph as such was decisive, becoming the bearer of meaning. ... By contrast to the photo book, the artists' book is not the bearer, but the medium of the artistic message. (Thurmann-Jajes 2002:20)

In highlighting the differences in the way the photograph is used and considered by these two groups, Thurman-Jajes has identified that a division may have always existed between the photographer and the artist using photography. Yet making books with the photograph as a 'bearer of meaning' or 'message' should not belong to any particular practitioner. If the photograph is therefore a universal and an open medium for all book makers then any questioning on *what is* and *what can be* a photobook requires consideration that embraces this diversity.

To ensure that the photobook remains vibrant and relevant, a flexible space for discourse and critique needs to be created that is inclusive of the broad range of authors and book forms in this medium. In 1998 artists' book librarian, collector and curator Clive Phillpot suggested a metaphor for the artists' book discipline as being 'white light' and the individual colours that made up white light as being the 'many categories of the spectrum' representing the broad nature of the practice. In this essay Phillpot's 'white light' metaphor is now applied to the range of published forms that employ or contain photographs beyond that of the artists' book. (Phillpot 1998:38)

Through an extension of Phillpot's prism, this essay will propose a grouping of the various forms of the book from photobook through zines to artists' books and their salient characteristics using individual colours (wavelengths of light). As the visible light spectrum has a rainbow of seven visible colours this proposition has seven as well. Although two additional 'colours', familiar to photographers, that of infrared and ultra-violet, have been added to recognise specific aspects of photography publishing at the extreme ends of the range. Each colour and book form has specific characteristics and identifiers associated with it – it is recognized that many books may challenge attempts to place them within just one colour in this spectrum.

The transition from the infrared to ultra-violet intentionally locates those books conceived and produced by photographers at the warmer end of the spectrum. Book forms in the cooler end of the spectrum would be principally books made by artists using photography. Placement within this spectral framework may create some interesting challenges including the divisions of 'artist' and 'photographer', and how practitioners describe themselves and their creative products.

The 9 colours and their identifiers are:

### **Infrared – The Deluxe Photobook**

- A book of monumental proportions approaching what bibliographers and librarians call 'double elephant' (up to 78cm tall for Helmut Newton's *Sumo*);
- Usually consists of a monograph styled 'best of', or, of a tightly thematic subject matter by a particular photographer;
- Are limited editions, expensive to buy and have limited markets that centre on private collectors and institutions; and
- Are usually commissioned by a small number of specialist art publishing houses as opulent objects of art, design and packaging.

### **A Deluxe Photobook Exemplar:**

André De Dienes; Steve Crist, *Andre de Dienes : Marilyn*, Taschen, 2002

### **Red - The 'Classic trade' Photobook**

A book form in the tradition of Walker Evans' *American Photographs*<sup>1</sup> (1938), William Eggleston *Eggleston's Guide* (1976), Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959), and John Gossage's *The Pond* (1985). Characteristics of these books may include:

- A single photograph per opening, the facing page blank and may sometimes contain a title or caption;
- Sometimes it is a book co-published with an exhibition of the same title;
- Simulation of the gallery experience of viewing photographs and therefore is sometimes referred to as an 'exhibition in a book';
- Images in these books are carefully and purposefully sequenced to carry the narrative intended by the author; and
- An essay relating to the work by the photographer, curator or writer often accompanies this book form – occasionally the essay may be of an obtuse content.

### **The 'Classic trade' Photobook Exemplar:**

Gordon Undy, *Intimations : with selected poetic responses by Michele Morgan*, 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> This book is currently not held by the State Library of Queensland

### **Orange – Design Photobook (collaboration)**

The authors of this form consider that photobooks are an experience that can be enhanced by the influence of creative graphic design that may include:

- Usually is a collaboration between the photographer and a designer so as to transform the photographs into a strident work of visual communication;
- The presentation of photographs over double pages, or being montaged, or printed full-bleed as well as being scaled variably;
- Inventive typography and layout design enhancements;
- High quality book production, printing, finishing and packaging; and
- A differentiation from other photobooks by the inventiveness of the design features and the surprise that is encountered by the reader in engaging with the physicality of the book and how it operates as a communicative device.

### **Design Photobook Exemplar:**

Ying Ang, co-designed with Teun Van Der Heijden, *Gold Coast*, 2014.

### **Yellow – POD Photobook**

- These books are usually self-published;
- They may emulate bookstore trade books from simple booklets to grand coffee table tomes;
- They can be produced by anyone with minimal photography and computer skills and just require access to online photobook-service providers;
- Single book or multiple copies can be made;
- Affordable pricing considering the sophistication of the product;
- POD services generally utilize templates for ease of use by clients of limited skill;
- POD books may have a limited range of options for special finishing or designed-in features; and
- Many POD book users create book ‘dummies’ that may lead to a more trade-based publication at a later stage.

### **POD Exemplar:**

Scott L. McCarney, *Various fires and MLK*, 2010, digitally printed by [www.Lulu.com](http://www.Lulu.com)

## **Green - Emergent - PhotoStream\* [of Consciousness], Photozine\*or Insta-photobook\*, Imagebooks\***

This aspect of photobook publishing is occupied by a large number of DIY practitioners accessing a range of print technologies from desktop inkjet and laser printers to affordable digital press printing and binding technologies. Content of these books could be considered a visual form of imagist or concrete poetry – they exhibit a subject and assembly sensibility that could match ‘stream of consciousness’ approaches to art. Other aspects include:

- Usually self-authored or collaborative publications;
- Are made in limited numbers/editions, often hand sewn or stapled;
- The books are sold through specialist popular culture bookshops or online;
- Often these books may be the result of crowd sourced funding and may be derived from online image storage or social media platforms like Instagram; and
- Their locale of popularity and distribution may be regional.

\*Names considered to best describe these emergent forms

### **Imagebook Exemplars:**

Jay Dimock and Lloyd Stubber, *Division of Vision*, 2014

Louis Porter, *Conflict Resolution*, 2012

### **Photozine Exemplar:**

Gracia Haby, *But I just got here a minute ago*, 2011

## **Blue – Photopapers\* Photomag\* (broadsheet / newspaper / magazine)**

These emergent photobooks take their physical form and production values from conventional print media. Other aspects include:

- Availability through POD service providers;
- Print runs may be small and limited or quite extensive of 1,000 copies or more;
- These works may parody existing newspaper or magazine titles as a form of activism or commentary on print media and society; and
- They may provide a photographer with a larger-scale publication format at a low production cost.

\*Names considered to best describe these emergent forms

### **Photopaper Exemplar:**

Jacob Raupatch, *Radiata*, 2013.

### **Photomag/Photopaper Exemplar:**

Kelvin Skewes, *Nauru: What was taken and what was given*, 2014.

## **Indigo – Innovative Artists' Book**

This genre of the book is based around the idea of the artist as author, publisher and maker, and forms of the book that represent innovation, creativity and exploration of the book form. Historically this book form has been the domain of the artist and the way photography finds its way into the book can be more about the photo as a record, a fact or a trace representing the world and society that created it. Rather than something representing the passion that photographers have for the photograph as the product of their special visual perception of the world. Characteristics of these books include:

- Forms integral to the narrative expression and the artist will break rules and conventions to achieve their expectations for the book;
- Books engineered in ways that demand interaction, both through the visual senses but also through the haptics of handling and reading – the turning of pages;
- Books that may mix photographs and text or text over photographs, or text as photographs and photographs as text;
- Multi-media productions where the photograph becomes a part of a larger interplay of media; and
- Bespoke unique state or a work that is published as a limited edition.

It should be noted that the artists' book discipline might encompass an equally diverse range of book forms.

### **Innovative Artists' Book exemplars:**

Marshall Weber; Christopher Wilde; Sara Parkel; Alison E Williams; Isabelle Weber; *Eleven*, 2002.

Helen Douglas; Zoë Irvine, *Illiers Combray*, 2004.

### **Violet – Artists’ Book Codex**

Related to books that utilize the conventional codex form and may explore the narrative form, conceptual art ideas as well as artmaking techniques. These books may exhibit the following characteristics:

- Codex book form;
- A range of production values including artisan printers and binders;
- Contain texts as well as graphic elements and photographs; and
- Printing techniques such as silkscreen, photoetching and gravure, inkjet, digital press and alternative imaging techniques like cyanotype.

### **Artists’ Book Codex Exemplars:**

Tommaso Durante; Chris Wallace-Crabbe; Elke Ahokas, *Limes*, 2011.

Lyn Ashby, *The ten thousand things*, 2010.

### **Ultra-Violet – Artists’ Books, Book Arts, Livre d’Artiste Book**

Consistent with the production and aesthetic values of the ‘fine press’ with the following characteristics:

- Texts are usually handset letterpress, photographs made by traditional photo etching or gravure techniques and binding and presentation in cloth and leather often with ‘book arts’ embellishments;
- The books are limited editions and utilize artisan practitioners and specialists in the production of the work;
- Often the book may be commissioned by an entrepreneurial publisher following the French tradition of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century; and
- These works are expensive to buy and have limited markets that centre on private collectors and institutions.

### **Artists’ Books, Book Arts, Livre d’Artiste Book Exemplars:**

Carolyn Fraser and Holly Morrison, *Extinguishing of stars*, 2003.

Peter Lyssiotis; Brian Castro, *A gardener at midnight : travels in the Holy Land ; from drawings made on the spot by Yabez Al-Kitab*, 2004.

In the debate surrounding the evolving photobook this photo-specific spectrum analysis is offered, as a non-hierarchical, flexible and creative nomenclature. The spectrum should be able to move with change and developments within the photo in the book and the ideas and the motivations behind those who create these communicative devices and their commentators and readers. Each constituent of the spectrum, although emanating its own 'wavelength' or 'colour', forms a part of the "white light" that is the continuum of the photograph and its place in the book.

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Phillpot, C. (1998). Books by artists and books as art. Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books. C. Lauf and C. Phillpot. New York, D.A.P./Distributed Art Publications Inc.  
Thurmann-Jajes, A. (2002). ars photographica: Fotografie und Künstlerbücher. Weserburg, Bremen, Neues Museum