

Conversation Conversation Conversation

How we see photo- books

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The seemingly unstoppable flow of photobooks has created a discoverability dilemma: how does one find out what's being produced and by whom? Beyond the glut of journals, blogs and yearly gatherings, this is where the self-organising, grassroots nature of the photobook world comes into play – of which New York's 10×10 Photobooks is a prime example. Founded by Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich in 2012 as a salon and pop-up reading room, the organisation has since expanded, developing an array of activities intended to nurture the people and public-

ations of the NYC photobook community and beyond.

In a conversation at the Aperture Foundation's offices with Lesley A. Martin – the Foundation's Creative Director – Russet and Olga discuss their inspiration for the organisation, its most recent projects and their forthcoming publication: *How We See: Photobook by Women*.





LAM: 10×10 Photobooks is an organisation now defined by a fairly wide range of activities – reading rooms, salons, exhibitions, and books – but ultimately you bring people together who share an interest in the photobook, and the idea of community seems to be at the core. I see it as a way of extending the network of people interested in photobooks beyond the usual once a year feeding frenzy that has come to define most larger art book fairs. Is that an accurate way to define the group and its goals?

OY: It's a lot about community and connecting people who may share an interest, but approach it from different angles – for us that's designers, collectors, photographers, and publishers. We've created a platform where they can come together offline as well as online.

RL: I think our mission statement says it all: we aim to create awareness and engage the global photobook community. We do that by organising salons roughly once a month with people who publish or design photobooks – or

with photographers who are making their first photobook and want to preview it with us. Another important component is our programme of setting up reading rooms that travel in partnership with other institutions. Often these have resulted in publications.

OY: When Russet and I met in 2012, the photobook meet-up I was organising brought people together who were complete strangers. They just found out about the event through social media and they all came.

RL: Marc Feustel, of the blog Eyecurious, told me about the Facebook group and I joined. Olga and I met and immediately hit it off. She asked me and my husband Jeff to bring some of our Japanese photobooks to a meet-up in Long Island City. It was a very humid day – we were all hot and sweaty but everyone was really into the books. It was clear that we shared this singular nerdy obsession. After that, Olga and I had drinks and agreed: we needed to do something like that again. The New

York Art Book Fair at PS1 was coming up; we had all this great material from Japan that no one had ever seen...

OY: We wanted to find a way to showcase contemporary Japanese photobooks and to expand our own understanding by asking ten knowledgeable people to choose ten recent books from Japan that should be better known.

RL: At the time, I was working as a researcher with a curator at the International Center of Photography who introduced me to Deirdre Donohue and Matthew Carson from the ICP Library. We went to them and to Nayland Blake who runs the ICP-Bard programme and asked if we could use the ICP Bard MFA Public Space. The space is a block away from PS1 and was a perfect place to hold a reading room during the fair. They agreed... and then the two of us had nine weeks to reach out to ten different people in Japan to choose and send their ten books to New York!

LAM: Hence the genesis of 10×10.

'THE SELECTION OF BOOKS WE RECEIVED WAS FILLED WITH DISCOVERIES FOR ALL OF US'

OY: Yes!

RL: The resulting reading room included books that had no distribution in the US at all, or Europe. It was like a little library. We set up tables all around the perimeter of the room, with chairs so people could sit. As people stumbled into the space we realised that there were other people in New York who had an interest in this material. And there were a lot of discoveries. One discovery for all of us was Daisuke Yokota's *Backyard* – that book came in from Dan Abbe and Andrew Thorn, who run PH, an online shop for Japanese zines and photobooks. We all looked at that book and thought, "Wow, this is amazing".

We originally thought we would just do three reading rooms and that would be the end of 10x10. But the response from the community was so great that we ended up becoming an official not-for-profit organisation and moving forward.

LAM: One of the things I like about the 10x10 events I've been to is their intimacy; they're very hands on. None of the books are ever behind glass. Someone from the 10x10 team is always in attendance during the reading rooms – you can sit, look at the books as you like, and there are docents on hand to answer questions or discuss the books.

OY: Yes, we also ask each selector to write a short statement to explain what brings these books together, which helps people understand the individual books and the connections between them. These are used in our publications.

LAM: So you came up with a simple, relatable, and easily replicated formula, namely, having a group of knowledgeable people present their books or make recommendations. And obviously it's one that you've expanded upon since that first project in 2012, including subsequent projects such as *10x10 American Photobooks*, *CLAP! Contemporary Latin American Photobooks*, and a new project, forthcoming this fall, *How We See*, focusing on photobooks by women. Have they all followed this model?

RL: *10x10 American Photobooks* came about when we were asked by the Tokyo Institute of Photography to bring the Japanese photobooks to Tokyo – we proposed a group of American photobooks instead. This time, we implemented multiple levels of 10x10. There was a reading room component again, for which ten individuals each selected ten books. Then, Olga suggested, 'Let's bring in the online community and have an additional online selection of ten bloggers each picking ten books.'

Those books were not physically in the reading room, but they presented another layer, which was quite different from what curators, publishers, or photographers chose.

LAM: Another outcome of these projects is that you have placed the resulting collections of books in libraries and museums. Was that idea baked in from the start as well?

OY: Yes. When we first approached ICP to collaborate and to use their space for our first exhibition, we negotiated with them that all the books would be donated to the ICP Library. A lot of books were donated by publishers and photographers so we didn't want them to end up in a private collection. It's always been important that the books remain accessible to the public.

RL: One thing I should say about 10x10 is that, in general, it is a very democratic and collaborative process. In terms of members, it's myself, Olga and also our collaborator Michael Lang, as well as Matthew Carson, an early member who helped organise a lot of the projects. Matthew was particularly instrumental in helping us reach out to the Latin American photobook community for the *CLAP!* project. Michael also has this tremendous photobook collection of primarily European and American books; he is

an incredible kind of champion and resource for us. But in addition to these key members, we've had lots of volunteers, lots of researchers and contributors – lots of people who help us and make things possible. The dialogue has to be quite expansive to make it work.

LAM: Another way to characterise what you do is as a networked, micro-research project driven by person-to-person recommendations – one that provides further opportunity for attention to be paid in specific regions or topics that haven't been covered extensively. Of course, in the case of a project like *CLAP!*, Latin America is diverse and large – not a country but a continent. How did you tackle that project in particular?

OY: We realised that there were so many publishers and photographers who were doing interesting things that we don't see much outside of the region. Here we decided not to be so literal with the 10x10 structure: we invited twelve selectors to pick books because the region is so big, and we allowed them to select eight to twelve books each. We had 130 books in the end. It was incredible, and the selection of books we received was filled with discoveries for all of us.

LAM: So many of the *CLAP!* books were totally new to me. These are books that simply don't make their way to the United States via fairs or book prizes or bookshops. I don't know if the barrier has to do with shipping costs, or just the typical dilemma of how to represent these books with niche audiences and get them into stores?

RL: This seems to be an issue not only between the US/Europe and Latin America, it's also within Latin America itself. So you have Argentinian publishers who don't necessarily share their books with the Mexican community. I don't know if "silo" is the right word, but there are definitely these little micro communities which aren't in communication with one another. We were definitely conscious that we were taking some liberties by pulling such a large region under one umbrella. But anyone who came to the reading room or spent time with the publication could at least get a sense of the range of books being published.

LAM: Your next publication project and reading room is not defined by region but by topic: *How We See: Photobooks by Women*. It's a very broad topic, photobooks created by women. How did you go about shaping it?

OY: We have done other non-regionally defined projects, like the ongoing Awake Reading Room, which focuses on zines and independent publishing on protest, resistance, and social awareness. But new projects involve a lot of conversations and brainstorming sessions, and ultimately it was clear to us that this was an important and overlooked area. To do it justice, we had to canvas the widest possible geographic area. That was the basis of our selection of contributors – geographic diversity.

LAM: And was the framework as simple as "books by women"?

RL: First, we had to define what a woman was, so we took the most general

approach: if a photographer self-identifies as a woman, then they're a woman. We also had to tackle issues of a photobook made collaboratively between men and women. We established that the photography should be by women only whilst the writing and thoughts included in the book could also be from men. We also invoked our conflict of interest policy: a selector couldn't have a direct connection to any book they selected. Obviously, that creates some limitations because if we're inviting women who know photobooks well and are experts within their region or community, they've obviously worked on books or supported books. So this necessarily leaves out books, resulting in a very subjective list.





LAM: I'll put it on the table that I was asked to be a selector, and it took some time to develop a particular framework, especially since I couldn't select Aperture books or titles I had worked on. I chose to look at a set of books that traced the evolving relationship of women artists to feminist discourse in the United States. I was initially worried that to do so properly meant we'd have to find a way to get books that had become collectible and thereby inaccessible. Instead, I found that some of the books I thought of as touchstones in this area were easily found online and were incredibly cheap. Perhaps because they had not, in fact, gained traction as valued objects yet.

RL: Yes. I got a little obsessed with this issue as we were working on this project. We started it without really knowing statistics or any kind of concrete numbers about the representation of women in the photobook community. And as we began to write the introduction we all felt the need to come up with some kind of concrete data and statistics to validate what we suspected. What we discovered was that men and women produced

equal numbers of photobooks over the past few years, but when it comes to *Books on Books* photobook anthologies or end-of-year round-ups – and the larger online inventory for well-known publishers – the numbers are pretty miserable. We picked the six most prominent *Books on Books* to gauge this by: of which only 10% of the profiled books are by women.

LAM: Whilst attempts to theorise the history of the photobook generally claim to represent an alternate thread to the history of photography – in other words, work that exists outside the canon – it's evident that it has still been told through a particular lens and one that is very much male. And if the same numbers of books are being published by both men and women, the question is: why are these books not on the collective radar? Are we just not paying attention? Are they being published by smaller publishers – or self-published – so they're more scarce when they do exist?

RL: I think one telling window into this glass ceiling is to look at dummy and first book awards. These are points

of entry. That is where women are submitting books; they're usually younger photographers or those that have come into photography more recently. The numbers are very good here: about 40% on the shortlist of aggregated dummy and first book awards were given to women in the period between 2013 and 2017. In fact, in that five-year period, there were times when there were more women than men on various shortlists. So I believe that what happens is that there's not sustained support later on. It's that mid-zone that is difficult to get beyond – the point at which a larger publisher is going to say, 'OK, we're going to commit money to this'. And it's expensive, as we all know, to produce a photobook. It's at this point of larger investment where things fall off. This is the larger dialogue that we hope to spark with *How We See* – it's a question of how we sustain that through the next steps within the various outlets of the photobook world. How do we ensure that ten years from now, when you look at a photobook anthology, the number won't be what it is currently, which is 10.5% of books by women.

LAM: Do you think *How We See* helps correct these oversights?

RL: As with every 10×10 project, the result is very subjective. We can't include everything. There are a lot of books "missing" from *How We See* – books that we wanted to see in, that we were surprised weren't picked. There are always those great photographers that are simply not the best photobook makers, because the photobook doesn't happen to be their medium of choice.

OY: All of us had this feeling that there are certain historical photobooks missing from this selection and that we wanted to highlight some that hadn't been chosen for one reason or another. Our solution was to create an historical list of photobooks to bring into the conversation. We invited an additional ten women writers/curators/historians to suggest books that, from their perspective, are historically important. These lists will also be published as a reference.

LAM: Do you find that this led to reworking your criteria of what a good photobook is? Does one stretch the definition here just because there's a sense that "these are women that need to be recognised as part of this history"?

OY: I don't think we stretched the definition of the photobook for this particular

project. I think we just kind of set the parameters outside of that.

RL: Several other selectors looked at the history of photobooks by women through the lens of feminism as well. Delphine Bedel, in the introduction to her selection, points the obvious, but often overlooked fact that the first photobook was made by a woman, Anna Atkins. And that women were at the forefront of many other firsts in photography. The first social political essay on photography was written by Lucia Moholy; Elizabeth McCausland wrote one of the earliest essays on photobooks.

LAM: And don't forget Nancy Newhall who was a key collaborator in early American photobooks with people like Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Ansel Adams, in addition to being one of the co-founders of Aperture and a MoMA curator.

RL: Exactly. So to discard their contribution as makers, as well as writers, critics, publishers and curators is an inaccurate reflection of the medium. We need to open up the discussion again. That's one of our goals with this project: to point to this younger generation of makers as well as to sketch out something like an additive history – and to have a discussion about its role. Ultimately, is there

something distinct in a photobook by a woman? I don't know. Will different people come to different conclusions by looking at the books in the reading room? Absolutely. You might gravitate to more of a fetishistic object photobook by an "unknown" Chinese or Peruvian artist, whilst somebody else is going to turn to Laia Abril because of the power of the content that she pulled together for a project like *On Abortion*. We're all so different and we approach the question differently. I think the goal of any 10×10 reading room is to allow a space for everyone to find out what draws them and then to hopefully discover something new.

OY: And I think that's a lot of it, the idea of inviting so many selectors who have different interests and backgrounds. It allows us to put together a reading room that is very democratic and people can find something that they know, something that they don't know. New books, new experiences.

How We See: Photobooks by Women will be launched with a reading room at the New York Public Library on October 24 – 27, 2018.

'WOMEN WERE AT THE FOREFRONT OF MANY OTHER FIRSTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY'