

What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women

1843–1999

Teaching Module

A 2-Class Module

Suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses in: Photography • Visual Studies • Art History • Media Studies • Women's & Gender Studies • Book Arts • Documentary Studies • Curatorial Practice

Module Overview

This two-class module uses *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999* as the primary text to examine how women have shaped the history of photography through the photobook—a medium long dominated by male-authored narratives. The module is designed to help students develop a critical vocabulary for analyzing the relationship between gender, print format, photographic authorship, and canon formation.

What They Saw is a 352-page anthology surveying 258 examples of photography in print—classic bound books, portfolios, personal albums, unpublished books, zines, and scrapbooks—spanning from Anna Atkins's cyanotype albums of 1843 to the photobooks of the late 1990s. Edited by Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich and published by 10×10 Photobooks, the book is organized chronologically into themed chapters: Trailblazers (1843–1919), The New Woman (1920s–1930s), From Ashes to A Family (1946–1955), Nostalgia, Pop, and Revolution (1960s–70s), Sexual Politics (1976–1979), and Reaching for a Photo Democracy (1980s–90s). Eleven commissioned essays by scholars including Mariama Attah, Jörg Colberg, Elizabeth Cronin, Deirdre Donohue, Anthony Hamber, Christine Hult-Lewis, Michiko Kasahara, Paula V. Kupfer, Jeffrey Ladd, Carole Naggar, and Tony White provide critical frameworks for engaging with the material.

The book's central inquiry—*Who has been included in the photobook canon, who has been excluded, and what does it mean to reconstruct that history with women at the center?*—provides the organizing question for this module. Across two classes, students will examine how gender has shaped access to publication, how format and materiality carry meaning, and how anthologies like *What They Saw* act as interventions in art-historical canon formation.

Learning Objectives

1. Analyze how women's photobooks have used diverse print formats—bound volumes, portfolios, albums, zines, and scrapbooks—to assert authorial vision and navigate the constraints of the publishing landscape across different historical periods.

2. Examine the historical conditions—social, political, technological, and institutional—that enabled or constrained women’s access to photographic publication from the mid-nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth century.
3. Evaluate the anthology as an act of canon formation, considering what editorial choices reveal about how photographic history is constructed, challenged, and revised when women’s contributions are centered.
4. Compare photobooks by women across different geographical, cultural, and historical contexts, identifying both shared strategies of self-representation and locally specific approaches to image-making and bookmaking.
5. Develop critical vocabulary for discussing the materiality of photographic publications—paper, typography, binding, sequencing, image quality, layout—and their relationship to questions of gender, visibility, and authorship.

Required Text

What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999, ed. Russet Lederman & Olga Yatskevich (New York: 10×10 Photobooks, 2021). 352 pp., 672 images. Softcover with dust jacket. ISBN: 978-0-578-93213-2. Winner of the 2021 Paris Photo–Aperture Foundation Catalogue of the Year Award and the 2022 Kraszna-Krausz Photography Book Award. Named one of *Time Magazine*’s 20 Best Photobooks of 2021. Available from 10x10photobooks.org.

Class 1: Invisible Histories — Women, the Photobook and the Canon

Duration	75–90 minutes
Assigned Reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mariama Attah’s introductory essay “Remapping Photobook History.” 2. Anthony Hamber’s essay on “Trailblazers,” early women photographers and the invention of the photobook. 3. Carole Naggar’s essay on “The New Woman” on women’s vernacular photography and the album tradition <p>Chapters: Introduction, Trailblazers (1843–1919) and The New Woman (1920–1935), complete</p>
Key Themes	Canon and exclusion; the photobook as gendered object; vernacular formats (albums, scrapbooks) as acts of authorship; materiality and access; the relationship between domesticity, scientific inquiry, and photographic publication

Session Structure

Part 1: Who Gets to Make a Photobook? (20–25 min)

Open by asking students to define a “photobook.” Write responses on the board, then introduce the expansive definition used in *What They Saw*: “classic bound books, portfolios, personal albums, unpublished books, zines and scrapbooks.” Discuss why this broadened definition is essential when recovering women’s photographic history. How do conventional definitions of the photobook—emphasizing authored, commercially published volumes—systematically exclude the formats women most commonly used?

Introduce the book’s chronological structure (“Remapping Photobook History”) and walk through the “Trailblazers” chapter. Examine how Anna Atkins’s cyanotype albums (1843–1853) and other early works by women operated at the intersection of science, art, and domestic practice. Discuss how these works challenge the notion that women’s photographic publication began only in the twentieth century.

Part 2: Format, Access and the Politics of Publication (25–30 min)

Move into “The New Woman” chapter, examining how the interwar period created new possibilities for women in photography and publishing. Discuss specific examples from the chapter: how did photographers like Germaine Krull, Laure Albin-Guillot, Varvara Stepanova and others gain access to commercial publication? What role did avant-garde movements, illustrated magazines, and new printing technologies play?

Use the essays by Attah, Hamber and Naggar to frame a discussion of materiality. Have students compare specific spreads from the book: What can we learn from the physical characteristics of these publications—paper stock, binding, print quality, layout—about the conditions under

which they were made? How does *What They Saw* use reproduction and commentary to help us read these material qualities?

Part 3: Discussion and Close Reading Exercise (20–25 min)

Divide students into small groups. Each group selects one photobook from the Trailblazers or New Woman chapters and prepares a brief analysis addressing: (1) What format is this publication, and how does its materiality relate to the conditions under which the photographer worked? (2) Would this work be included in a conventional photobook history? Why or why not? (3) What does its inclusion in *What They Saw* argue about the boundaries of the photobook canon? Groups share findings with the class.

Class 2: Gender, the Body and the Afterlife of the Photobook

Duration	75–90 minutes
Assigned Reading	<p>Michiko Kasahara’s essay on Japanese women photographers; Carole Naggar’s essay on women and war photography</p> <p>Chapters: Sexual Politics (1976–1979), complete, plus one additional chapter of the student’s choice. Can be: <i>From Ashes to A Family</i>; <i>Nostalgia, Pop, and Revolution</i>; or <i>Reaching for a Photo Democracy</i>.</p>
Key Themes	The body and self-representation; feminist publishing networks; the photobook as personal and political statement; re-contextualization of women’s work through the anthology form; recovery versus discovery in photographic history

Session Structure

Part 1: The Personal Is Published (20–25 min)

Begin with the Sexual Politics chapter, which covers a concentrated period (1976–1979) of feminist photographic activity. Examine how photographers used the book form to address the body, sexuality, domesticity, and gendered labor. Discuss how the photobook functioned as an alternative space when galleries, museums, and mainstream publishers were often inaccessible to women working with explicitly feminist content.

Draw connections between format and politics: How did zines, artist books, and self-published works allow women to control the production and distribution of images of their own bodies and lives? How do these publishing strategies relate to broader feminist movements of the period?

Part 2: Global Perspectives and Cross-Cultural Comparison (25–30 min)

Using the essays by Kasahara and Naggar, expand the discussion beyond Euro-American contexts. Examine how women photographers in Japan, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere navigated different cultural, political, and publishing landscapes. How does *What They Saw*’s global scope challenge the Eurocentrism of conventional photobook histories?

Have students compare a photobook from the Sexual Politics chapter with one from their chosen additional chapter. What continuities and ruptures emerge across different periods? How do the material and formal strategies shift as women gain—or lose—access to different modes of publication?

Part 3: The Anthology as Argument (20–25 min)

Close with a meta-critical discussion of *What They Saw* itself as a curatorial and editorial act. What does it mean to compile 258 photobooks by women into a single volume and a touring reading room? Discuss the tension between *recovery* (bringing forgotten works to light) and *discovery* (presenting well-known works in a new framework). How does the anthology’s design and hands-on reading room set-up—its chronological structure, its mix of celebrated and

unknown works, its inclusion of albums and scrapbooks alongside commercial publications—make an argument about what the history of photography looks like when women are centered?

Connect to the companion volume *How We See: Photobooks by Women* (10×10 Photobooks, 2018), which surveys contemporary photobooks by women from 2000–2018. Together, the two volumes span the full arc of women’s photographic publishing. Ask students: What has changed? What persists? What would a third volume need to address?

Additional Resources and Contexts

Companion Publication

How We See: Photobooks by Women, ed. Russet Lederman & Olga Yatskevich (New York: 10×10 Photobooks, 2018). Surveys 100+ contemporary photobooks by women from 2000–2018. Instructors may assign selections from both volumes for comparative analysis.

Exhibition History

What They Saw has been presented as a hands-on reading room exhibition at multiple venues internationally, including the Getty Research Institute (April–May 2025) and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2024). These reading room installations invite visitors to physically handle the photobooks surveyed in the anthology—a pedagogical model instructors may wish to emulate using library special collections or artists’ books holdings.

Suggested Assignment

Canon Intervention Exercise: Each student identifies one photobook by a woman (published 1843–1999) that is *not* included in *What They Saw*. Students write a 500–750-word proposal for its inclusion, addressing: the photographer and historical context; a material description of the publication; which chapter it belongs in and why; and what its inclusion would add to the anthology’s argument. This exercise reinforces close looking, research skills, and critical engagement with canon formation.

Discussion Prompts for Further Exploration

- How does the category “photobooks by women” function differently when applied to the nineteenth century versus the 1990s? Is the category itself historically stable?
- What is the relationship between the personal album and the published photobook? How does blurring this boundary reshape our understanding of photographic authorship?
- How do institutional contexts—museums, libraries, archives, university collections—determine which photobooks survive and which disappear? What role does an anthology like this play in that ecosystem?
- Compare the editorial strategies of *What They Saw* with those of *Flashpoint! Protest Photography in Print*. How do these two 10×10 Photobooks anthologies approach canon formation differently? What does each volume argue about the role of photography in print?

This teaching module was developed for use with What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999, published by 10×10 Photobooks. For additional resources, visit 10x10photobooks.org.