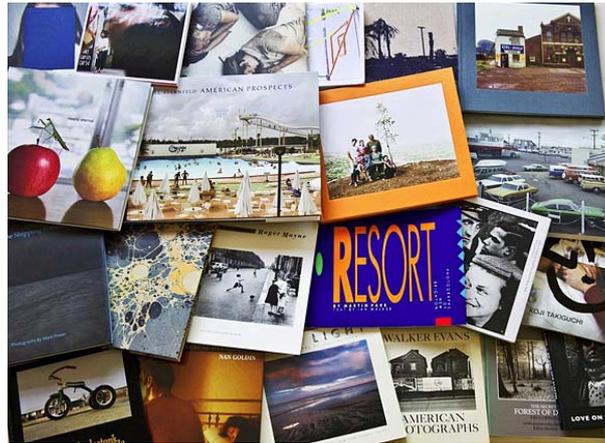


# THE PHOTOBOK



A selection of photobooks

Although the form of assembly together of a set of photographs has existed since the beginnings of photography, with Fox Talbot's *'The Pencil of Nature'* and Anna Atkin's cyanotypes *'Photographs of British Algae'*, this form of photography came to be fully recognised from the turn of the 20th century, by the publication of Martin Parr & Gerry

Badger's three volumes *'The Photobook: A History'* in 2004, 2006 and 2014. These were not the first, as there had been earlier publications on this subject, of which one of the earliest was by Elizabeth McCausland, American art critic and art historian, in the journal *Complete Photographer* in 1942. These 'books on photobooks' and the facilities to create photobooks using Blurb and other software applications set the scene for, what are now, daily announcements of new titles, from publishers and by self-publishing.



The Photobook: A History, vols 1,2 and3, by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger

Attendees had travelled from mainland Europe and even the USA. One of the speakers at the festival the following year was Laia Abril, who spoke of her work about Cammy Robinson, who had died of bulimia, titled *'The Epilogue'*. Abril continues her projects on important but distressing subjects; with *'On Abortion'*, published in 2018. She was given the RPS Hood Medal Award in 2019, as covered in the September 2019 RPS Journal awards section.

There are now numerous photobook sales fairs, competitions and exhibitions held around the world each year; the most well-known probably being those at Paris-Photo and at Arles. At Arles in 2019 there were 30 pop-up style stalls with around



Photobook sales tables, Bristol, 2015



Kassel selected photobook dummies 2018, shown at Format, Derby, 2019

50 publishers. As well as these there are several exhibitions for book dummies (prototypes), of which the most known is that at Kassel, Germany. During 2018 over 30 such photobook events were held, mainly in Western Europe. Many of these are held at the same time as exhibitions of photographs, for example photobook exhibitions at Arles and Paris-Photo have had accompanying photobook exhibitions since their inception. In some cases, as well as a photobook exhibition under the same auspices, there are others set up independently. The Offprint event at Tate Modern

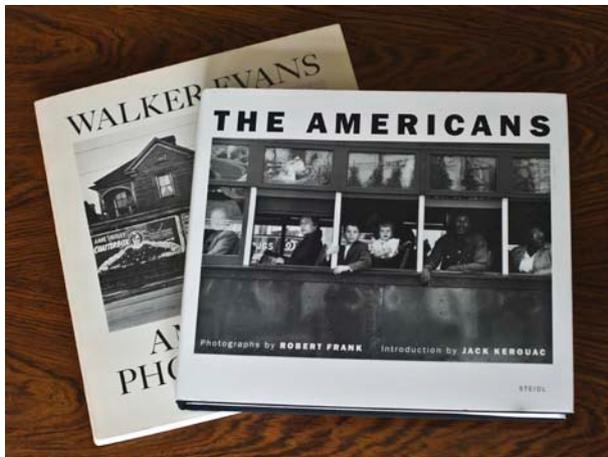
held at the same time as Photo London at Somerset House is an example. The way these are organised is by a jury selection a short-list for exhibition from the overall entry numbers, together with a winning title. The short-list from the Kassel exhibition travels to several countries in Europe and is normally also shown in the UK at the biennial Format festival in Derby.



Photobook sales tables at Tate Modern, June 2019

What is it that distinguishes a photobook from other books of photographs? The prime factor that has become established is that a photobook should first and foremost be grounded in a purpose or concept basis for its existence; what

is it about, what is its narrative story. This separates it from being just a book of photographs, however excellent these may be. The reference examples often quoted are 'The Americans' by Robert Frank and 'American Photographs' by Walker Evans. Looking through either of these readers will see that they include a wide range of genres of photographs, particularly in the former.



Robert Frank and Walker Evans photobooks

The design process for a photobook almost invariably involves use of physical prints rather than use of the computer. A survey on this published by Aperture, New York in autumn 2018 listed 38 of 39 photographers using this method to edit and sequence their photographs.



Discussing page sequences and spreads, Magnum workshop, June 2013

Text may be limited to no more than a few captions, may be absent entirely or may feature as a large part of the content of a photobook. However much is present, it forms a part of the book as much as the photographs. For example, Chris Steele-Perkins 2019

publication *'The New Londoners'* has full page photographs of family members and short conversations by those in the photo on the other page of the spread. Their words are often very open and frank and add greatly to the value of the book. A further example is the interview with Alec Soth in *'I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating'*, reviewed in the April 2019 RPS Journal, in which he discusses how in this work he has changed his approach to photographing people away from 'directing his subjects'.

When it comes to competitions, assessment normally takes into consideration the 'value' of the concept underlying the book, the photography, the sequencing, placement and design of the book spreads and the total book, the look and feel of the book in the hand (some even mention the smell of the opened book) and how well the choice of layout



*END*, by Eamonn Doyle. An example of separate page content

and paper fits the subject. Books may range from hardbacks, perhaps in a slipcase, through to zines on newsprint paper. All are equally valid, the match with the type of topic/concept is the point for consideration.

There are many examples of published photobooks which are hardly books at all; such as those with separated single or folded sheets collated together in a slipcase. Inclusion of loose sheets or pages of differing sizes within the book also occur; in short, almost anything goes.

It is estimated that over 2000 photobooks are now published each year. The majority of sales are made on-line, with new titles advertised daily on publisher and photobook sales websites, such as [www.photobookstore.co.uk](http://www.photobookstore.co.uk) and [www.photoeye.com](http://www.photoeye.com) and by major publishers, such as Dewi Lewis, MACK and Aperture.

Further information: *Understanding Photobooks*, Jörg Colberg  
Published by Routledge ISBN 978 1 138 89269 9

Brian Steptoe FRPS, photobook collector  
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