

# ALEJANDRO ACIN

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“Life is about priorities, and for the majority photobooks are not in the top ten.”

**Alejandro Acin** is an artist, designer, educator and the director of IC Visual Lab.

This interview is part of a series of conversations I had between 2018-2021 with individuals from in and around the photobook ecology. They initially helped inform my PhD research, and subsequently my working towards the publication *Photobooks &* (2021, Onomatopée). I sought to speak with students, librarians, researchers, curators and makers in all their guises to hear a variety of perspectives regarding the interaction of photography and the page. Now, a selection of these interviews are presented at [www.photobookclub.org/photobooks&](http://www.photobookclub.org/photobooks&) with the kind permission of the respective individuals in order to contribute to our collective discourse regarding the contemporary photobook.

The conversation presented in these pages has been edited for cogency and clarity. Any citations made should include the interviewer and interviewee as well as date of publication (2021), details of interview locations, format and date are given on the cover.

Alex, with your involvement in publishing and organising events, I wonder whether a good place to start is asking you how you might describe the photobook community?

I've been involved in the past few years at various levels in all things photobook: I was running a photobook festival for 3 years, I have been involved with other festivals and collaborated with organisations to deliver photobook related activities. I guess my overall feeling is that there is a very active community, willing to help each other out and be supportive. It's not a very big one as we all know, and like in the graphic novel or poetry world, makers and readers are intertwined. There's always a discussion about the size of it and the dynamics. Comparing to any other discipline, it's still a very small community and you can see that when you go to festivals and fairs that basically it's always the same people. This has got its positive points I guess — you build up a community feeling and you can build up relationships with some of them. It's a meeting point for everyone to catch up but it also creates its own dynamics. I don't really see that many negative aspects of it because I haven't experienced them. Overall I think it is a very active community which is quite impressive due to the very little impact the medium actually has on the mainstream level. Over the last few years we have been witnessing a massive amount of events and workshops, little and big exhibitions, books, imprints, articles about the medium and so on. This can only be a positive thing and despite being a small community I think it's bigger than ever.

Is it primarily photographers, designers, academics... is it broader than that? You must have a good sense of the sort of people who are engaging in activities?

Yeah it's mainly practitioners, publishers, academics or designers. We all know that the

photobook audience is mainly composed by those who are also involved in the field, which is fine. I think that happens with hardcore music, poetry or graphic novels as well, and often in the small community you tend to have the practitioners as part of the audience and vice versa.

**You've spoken of the community as something which seems quite unified. There are though some different agendas within the community and different ways of doing things... different traditions and histories?**

Yes, as you say... it's as different as all of the groups you can find at a fair because you can find all the £5 books or the £200 limited edition collector's books. I think the actual community has a shared collective feeling. When you go to fairs you find a lot of groups of people which is quite interesting, it is very hard to find a single person doing things on their own. You meet groups of people that do things differently, that are interested in different themes or ways of making. You can still find a single author or publisher of a book but even they will have a little group of people working together because bookmaking is a collective process... at least from my thinking. If you are self publishing you are still working with a group of people, there is that collective feeling, at least for me.

**In terms of events like Photobook Bristol, what role do you think they play in the discourse of the contemporary photobook? Are they there to act as a focus point for people to come together? Are they there for celebration? Introspection?**

I guess that Photobook Bristol was a small event that focused on a very specific audience — the actual audience who normally consumes photobooks (the makers are the readers and vice versa). So it was a very specific, targeted audience. We used the model of a music festival where people pay for the weekend ticket and then with that money we try to cover all the expenses for the whole festival. It's a self sustained activity that has its limitations of course but also it brings a very special feeling (having 250 photobook geeks creates a very special environment believe or not). The audience was limited to 250 people which was the maximum capacity of the venue, and we were lucky to sell-out every edition.

We didn't have an aim of growing (bigger venue, more days, more access...) as that brings another set of requirements we didn't have the capacity for at the time. Everything was run by a very small team and a lot of good will. It was a good event to really understand the creative process of some of the books that were produced that year as well as the historical perspective.

In the last edition of Photobook Bristol, we had 40 different speakers from 12 countries from 5 continents. These professionals and practitioners came to share their experience of making books so the festival provided a platform for that experience and put them all in the same room to open the conversation. That was the main aim. The nature of the festival was very relaxed, it wasn't formal but the content was rich, rigorous and deep. Also, we didn't host it in a traditional art institution—we used a social club which was key to creating that relaxing feeling. That really affected the way people relate with each other, mixing speakers and audience and having food in the same place also helped to create another type of interaction. So as well as listening to some of the long admired or up-and-coming practitioners, you can also have a pint and have a dance with them... I think that is important, at the end of the day it's a celebration.

The schedule was very simple but very intense, there were talks from 9am to 6pm and some other small activities like workshops or exhibitions were placed alongside. It was mostly people talking about their own bookmaking practice and we tried to bring a mix... a diverse selection of speakers so that the contents and the topics would be quite different as well. And then the social aspect comes afterwards, after those conversations have taken place and people can get to talk. There's no division between the speakers and the audience — they ended up all mixed.

**That idea of the practitioners and the audience coming together — this is also what you eluded to earlier with the intertwined nature of makers and readers who are often performing both roles? The audience is other makers?**

Yeah, I mean I talk a lot about this with my partner as well, she is not a photographer, she doesn't do anything with photography or photobooks. We always have a chat about the community and she always says that 'there are many more important things than photobooks' [laughs], I mean... you always need a bit of interest to be trapped in this medium. The photobook community keeps... not complaining, but wondering or questioning how we can reach bigger audiences and how we can have a proper impact, or how we can come out of this little bubble — with the practitioners also being the consumers. If this needs to happen, it will happen. I know that you have to still try to do activities and events that are open and try to bring people in who might not be interested beforehand but it's quite difficult to figure how a medium that is so small can do that. I mean no-one buys books in general, that's the reality. But there are very few people spending £40-50 on a book.

We used to do this activity in Bristol called PB Labs which was very similar to The Photobook Club. That was interesting in order to seduce people who may not be into this medium beforehand, a chance to see books you couldn't buy or were out of stock. People who normally came had an interest (history, archives, photography, design...), it wasn't people who didn't have an interest in how images are disseminated in a book form. I think the main reason for attendance at these events like the festival (as well as selling books) are for people to meet other people and discuss or reflect on the process of making and selling books. It is almost like a need to articulate and talk about it. Reading books is a very individual experience and sometimes is good to have spaces to share these interpretations.

**It's interesting when you talk there about the need — if it's needed it will happen. There are some books where there is maybe no necessity to reach beyond our small community but then there are some books where authors are working on important subjects and speaking about the work in a particular way in which it seems too safe, and a missed opportunity, if it doesn't go further?**

I think that some photobooks are trying to communicate to a broader audience and others only interested in the book being made — a more fetishistic approach I guess. There isn't always an interest in disseminating to a large audience, and this also requires a lot of resources (distribution is the main obstacle). But then maybe some people make books to question the book itself and the book as a medium and that audience may be smaller. And there are many ... Michael Snow... *Cover to Cover* [2001] for example, that's not going to be speaking or trying to speak to a broader audience but it's still... the book can still communicate to someone who has never been interested in books. I don't think that books need to use the language of the photo essay or a narrative/storytelling structure but I do know we are narrative animals, and stories have been an incredibly useful device to captivate people's attention. However, experimental books or more abstract approaches still communicate something.

You have to have some kind of interest to buy a book. So if you have the privilege to be interested in the arts then there are more chances that you end up buying a book. Life is about priorities, and for the majority photobooks are not in the top ten.

Sometimes it's just about playfulness, another element that has attracted humans for centuries. Some books have the capacity to make other people buy a book, even if they never did before. One example is Thomas Sauvin's *Until Death Do Us Part* [2015]. I always show that book to people when they come to my home, people that aren't part of the photography community or don't have an interest in photography. I show them different books and they always come back to that one and say 'oh that's a brilliant book, I'm going to buy one', and some of them have. It was the first photobook they bought. And that book in particular — it's not like a loaded photo essay, it's very playful. And it's got a bit of humour as well, as an object it's interesting as

well, it's something different. So I believe he sold 9,000 books or something like that, I think it's in its 5th edition now which is quite amazing for a photobook that is not that old either. I don't know many who have done that.

It's quite difficult to say what the right approach is. The information based books can be very interesting too and I think that Matthieu Asselin's *Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation* [2017] is a good example but I think it has also been very successful because of the exhibitions attached to it, festivals... Asselin has had quite a lot of interviews on TV as well so I think the photobook plays a part within the whole strategy of the project. The topic is very relevant and concerns a wider population. The book is very well researched and produced, it's a brilliant book in its field. I don't know if the book was the most important element for the success of the project but it was a big part of the overall strategy. The publisher was an international publisher with international distribution — one of the problems with photobooks is distribution. We can still make great books that could interest many people but not all of them get to be seen or globally distributed. Some publishers use Amazon to overcome that but I think this damages more than helps, especially the small bookshops.

The internet plays a very important role within the photobook community. We have an opportunity to see books through videos online that we would never have a chance to see otherwise. So I mean there's quite a lot of factors that could affect the success, although we should firstly define what a successful book is.

**Yes, we should look to consider — and talk — of success in different ways for different purposes of publishing when we review and talk about photobooks I think. Success might be getting a show which leads on from the book as career progression or it might be that success is making sure that everyone on a street or in a particular suburb has seen the book or have held a meeting...**



There are many factors that come into play here. I always discuss what a successful photobook means for people before they start making their own books. Is it the number of people the book reaches? Is it how the ideas/story are communicated in the book as an object? Even if it's only seen by ten people? Is it a book that makes you feel something? Is it a book that sells? A book that helps you selling prints? A book that is picked by the media or reviewers? None of these? All of these at once?

We definitely need to review the definition of success, not just in the photobook land but in our daily life. The capitalist system has made a formula where success means reducing the risk of failing to the very minimum and I think that's a loose battle in the arts. People tend to relate success to the financial aspects of the book which I guess is only one of them (and it's an important one if you want to keep making books — you need to be thinking financially a little bit). But I guess it's not the only factor, the only form of success. For me it feels a little hard to make a general formula for what success could be because every single body of work or every single project has its own idiosyncrasies and its own universe and they are all very different

A successful book could be selling 9,000 copies, but if those copies are costing £150 and can only be sold to 9,000 rich people then is that a successful approach or is that a very limited audience? It depends on how or what the book's aim is. **A lot of people are using books as a career development tool, one of the good things is that they stay for a long time, you make them and they stay on your shelf for many years so it's an interesting way to create legacy.** Books have the ability to sneak into various and diverse contexts (museums, libraries, schools, shops, home baths...), they are not condemned to one single space or context so it's a very good tool to disseminate a photographic work. People are making books every day, it's hard to stand out.

**As well as thought regarding success, are there other interventions that you think could be useful for the photobook or the photobook community?**

Things that we could do within the community to move forward... I don't know, you almost feel that the fairs are sometimes a bit limited on what they can offer. They're still interesting but I don't know how effective they actually are in terms of bridging practices, processes and collectives. And, as I said before, distribution is very big issue, particularly now in the context of Brexit here in the UK. I wonder what would be the collective strategies in order to facilitate small publishers to have better distribution systems outside Amazon.

**I want to turn for a moment towards reading the photobook. In the interview sheet you made a comparison between reading a photobook and directing a film from someone else's script. I thought that was a fantastic analogy... that you are trying to create something that is somewhat your own out of a set of quite concrete blocks of input materials?**

I spend a lot of time with a book because I have an active role as a reader, I don't like to be spoon-fed. Reading books is an intimate experience so I really let myself be seduced by the images and what they are trying to tell me. I like books that present and embrace some kind of tension. I like books that give you space to think and to make connections where you are trying to understand what the author wants to communicate but which lead you to internal reflection about the way you see. As readers, we are malleable. That's one of the things I really like about photobooks, there is a constant conversation between what you see and what they show you. Every book creates its own Universe. The way they are read really varies depending on their nature and aim, I like to think of book structures that are coherent with the ideas shared in the book rather than only thinking of the traditional ways of reading a book.



This interview is an extension to the publication ***Photobooks &: A critical companion to the contemporary medium*** by Matt Johnston (Onomatopoe, 2021).