

10x10 PHOTOBOKS

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“ ... we need to make sure there are photobooks being produced that actually have a value for society”

Russet Lederman, Dolly Meieran and Olga Yatskevich are the 10x10 Photobooks team, responsible for publications, reading rooms, salons and research projects.

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& 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.

Matt Johnston

10x10 Photobooks team

RL: Russet Lederman

OY: Olga Yatskevich

DM: Dolly Meieran

10x10 has different arms or strategies; salons, reading rooms and publications, how do you think of those outputs and their aims and audiences?

RL: I think that there are different audiences but there's also a lot of overlap. It's not just the independently published, first-released photobook — it's also the historical photobook and what we see is the goal to bring all of those communities together. Those that might attend a salon in New York are different from our audience who live in Europe or in Africa or in Asia who can't attend a salon (but can attend an Insta salon during our Covid activity). Then there are people that are buying books who might be different from people who want to see a reading room with historical books in it. So they are different but there is overlap. The idea is that we are supporting the photobook's history and its future. Its history is quite young if we think of it only starting maybe with the *Fotografia Publica: Photography in print* exhibition in Madrid in the late 90s. That's the beginning and really it's only a 20 year history, so we are grappling with that a lot right now — especially with the *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women* [2021] publication.

At first we thought we were rewriting history by including women in it, but that suggested we accepted the history that had been written. And we don't. Quite blatantly we don't. It has been written by those who were collectors with quite subjective perspectives, and it is not inclusive, it has major gaps in it and so in a sense we all have to un-write this history before we can re-write it. Also we are looking at what the future will bring in terms of new books that are coming along that can be shared in salons and future reading rooms that might concentrate on contemporary photobooks.

OY: I think Russet said everything really well but

I wanted to add that we have been thinking about what is missing in engaging with the community. I think that maybe also one of our strengths is that we are always looking at what is out there and how we can reach audiences — with the salons, the publications and reading rooms for example.

RL: And also the Instagram takeovers I think is another way of engaging globally.

OY: Exactly. It allows you to bring people from any part of the world and make them feel like they are part of what 10x10 is doing.

All of that gives a sense of something which is very proactive, and the goals of the initiative are clear...

RL: We try to be pluralistic and we try to not show what is a good photobook or the best photobook but say, 'here are all the activities that are happening'. 'You as an audience are intelligent enough to make an assessment of what you think is interesting, but here are the options'. I think that's very key in our approach. It's not hierarchical. We each make our own collections ultimately as consumers of photobooks and as an audience for photobooks. So we are providing a platform for people to make those independent choices.

DM: We also make sure that there are other menus to choose from... people mentioned in a salon just last week how the photobook world tends to be somewhat insular and that they were really happy to be on 10x10 doing an Insta salon because they felt that we really made an effort to expand the conversation. It's not just the five most popular publishers, we are digging into the corners and finding other stuff.

With the salons in mind, and the individuals who take part, how do you balance the programme? I think you use the term 'dignitaries' on the website for the superstars of the photobook world, so you have these quite well-known voices but you also have some voices that a lot of people will be less familiar with?

DM: it's like a musical scale that goes back and forth — somebody known and somebody unknown, trying to balance it across-the-board in that way.

RL: Also historically Dolly, like with the Indian postcard collection that was documented in a photobook which was so outside the realm of usual photobook sharing...

DM: Right, but it still ties back. It is literally like zigzagging across the sort of binaries of time, of age, of gender, of source. Trying to get as many continents and as many different people and colours of people. I know it sounds a little bit like a simple laundry list but **there are so many great photobooks out there and so many different types of people making them and so many different types of books being made that it is fun and exciting to be able to find all these and share them with people.**

OY: I think back to what Russet said earlier, we are trying to be as democratic as possible in the audience we are trying to reach so that needs to be reflected in the projects we are engaging with.

DM: And reaching broader audiences is now even easier because everybody is primed to be virtual with the lockdowns. It has enabled us to encourage a wider, more de-centred audience.

So you are perhaps now seeing a broader audience from this last year, engaging in new ways with things like the salons?

RL: Yes I would say so. I think as we bring in different people from different communities often times we will have people who might know the individuals speaking but might not know 10x10, or might not know the photobook community. The hope is that they then look further and maybe come to the next salon and it's someone interesting that they don't know about. **One of the things that came up at our board was the need to support the history and the writing of the history of photobooks because there were a lot of organisations giving grants to producing photobooks but no one was giving any grants to explore the history.** So we

have thought about how to encourage people to do that. Unlike the traditional scholars who often do their research and then don't share it with other people, our attitude is just the opposite. We hope we will get people who will uncover things and make exhibitions about them and share them. We are not the experts. We are just one arm in many uncovering this very young history. Even photographic history I have to add is very skewed and it's being re-written right now because you had people who had such oversized influences and they left out so many people in their history writing.

DM: It is really an open source model, that's the way that we think about it.

OY: Yes, and from the beginning 10x10 was a lot about community and encouraging people to learn about photobooks and to contribute to the conversation and I think we are moving forward with that.

Russet, you alluded to the support available for production and I've seen that production really dominates the discourse of the photobook. Do you see that as being a problem that contributes to a certain insularity for the photobook?

RL: I think it's a tremendous problem, a big problem. **I think if the photobook world is to survive and not implode, we have to encourage a larger audience who might not be involved or interested in the very nerdy details of how you've produced your book, but instead the experience of viewing it and having it and owning it or gifting it.** To tap the audiences beyond I think is critically important and the problem when you get too into the nerdy bits of things is that you shut those people out. You don't create an entrance for them to enjoy it, because they feel like they need to have the lingo to understand it. The goal I really feel is to move the photobook beyond an insular environment with everyone patting each other on the back and saying 'you've done a good job'.

DM: Right, although this is something outside our control, we need to make sure there are photobooks being produced that actually have a value for society. I mean if you start thinking about it as printing—and it's a lot of trees to make a book—I think that there is a responsibility among bookmakers to make stuff that actually has some value outside their own ego, to put it bluntly. There are people who are doing things like that. At one of the Insta salons we had Maria Kapajeva who made this photobook in Estonia that was sourced from a factory that had closed and she got material from the women, and she took the book back to the community [*Dream is Wonderful, Yet Unclear*, 2020] and there are other people who have taken books back to the community like Mark Neville. These things have purpose and that's another piece of the puzzle...

RL: And that's what Susan Meiselas does too. She brought books back to the people in the Midlands who were in shelters because of domestic abuse and she bought books back to all of them as a document of their survival [*A Room of Their Own*, 2017].

DM: Well yes, and that book was by the institution that was also trying to encourage other women who were in trouble... so it wasn't even just for the women who made the book but to be used as a tool to get other women who are in trouble...

RL: So it comes back to this larger point about the book not just being enjoyed by those who are involved in the nuance of the production and the art world but also as a tool to communicate with a large community who might not even think of it as a form of art.

This nuance, the sophistication that we have arrived at with the photobook which has developed over the last 10 or 15 years, and the production values of a lot of contemporary books means that immediately some people are priced out of engaging with the medium. Archives, collections, exhibitions and reading rooms help to tackle issues of access, are there particular acts or strategies you think have been particularly successful with your events?

RL: I think the best example for us with that is the New York Public library. When we held *How We See* at the library on 42nd Street and 5th Avenue. That is a prime tourist spot for people in New York and you have people walking in who know nothing about photobooks who enter the reading room. If you do a reading room at somewhere like the Museum of modern Art or PS1, somewhere that has art with a capital 'A', you have a very different audience. You don't touch beyond the art audience and someone who is already putting on their thinking caps thinking that art is what they're going in to see. Value and preciousness all come into that viewing experience which are different to coming into a reading room inside an institution whose mandate is to interact with the public free of charge.

When you have reading rooms in different places, much like the salons, you inherit some of that audience that they already have... and you also have the audience that 10x10 has, but what else do you do in order to create opportunities for people to be able to engage with these books. Beyond those that are entering anyway or aware anyway?

RL: There is public programming and it depends on the institution. So for example we did the reading room at the Museum of fine Arts in Boston who are down the road from Massachusetts College of art and design. So the curators of MFA Boston partnered with the deans at Mass College and the head of education at MFA Boston to engage graduate students from Boston University to act as kind of experts. We did what we called 'Spotlight talks' that were 15 minutes and each graduate spoke about a book from the reading room to the general public. That was free of charge and it engaged the academic community. So we try very hard to do programming like that which might be a panel discussion or the Spotlight talks where we encourage people from the community to become experts and then share their expertise with the community.

Do you find that your approach to photobooks which doesn't focus only on the new is counter to a pronounced interest with the new and the latest that we see a lot of in the photobook community?

RL: We do both and are very clear that we support going forward but we also support going backwards.

DM: An interest in the latest is a sort of side-effect of the Internet... that everything is new and fast and 30 seconds. But I think we absolutely make an effort to not ignore the new. I mean we can certainly champion it and if something is a brand-new design or comes out this week and it's a never been seen before use of paper then yes we will talk about that. But it's not new for the sake of being new, **that newness is coming out of a history and it helps to know that history to appreciate the novelty and what is being done differently.**

RL: I think there is room for all. There isn't one type of photobook that needs to be made — we need to provide space for all of them. We allow for the ability to discuss newness but also as Dolly said, to discuss that it comes from a larger conversation that is ongoing. We have to maybe look at what the earlier influences were, and whether the artist is acknowledging them or not.

These novel, contemporary photobooks are often relatively expensive, Michael Mack has spoken about the medium being a luxury item. I wonder if that's something you feel is the case?

DM: Only if someone is charging \$300 for a photobook; then it's a luxury item.

RL: I mean there are different audiences. You have the nerdy photobook collectors who are mostly men in their 50s, and they are a very different breed than the collector who is looking at the first book prize. The collectors would be happy to spend \$200 on a special edition of a book but they are the rare exception and most

people are going to spend under \$100. Somewhere maybe usually around \$60 for a photobook.

DM: But it's not just about the collector it's also about the vision of the artist, that the artist has the means to produce something that actualises a vision.

When a reading room is completed, the entirety of those
With access in mind, for those that maybe can't afford
to purchase this vision... The works from your reading
rooms go on to be placed in an existing institution rather
than being kept as a growing collection.... why is that so
important to 10x10?

RL: It's very interesting when books get donated to libraries because sometimes they get donated to libraries and they go deep into storage and never come out again. For us that is problematic. So we work very hard to make sure the books are given to an institution where they will continue to be accessible to the public. And that is very strongly a mandate for us. We ask only that labels indicate that they came from an original collection as a totality from 10x10 Japanese or the 10x10 American or the 10x10 Latin American. If you give something to one of the storied institutions like the Morgan, like the Beinecke, on one level yes, you are giving it to a public institution, but on another level you're putting it into deep storage for a long time potentially and that is not part of our goal. Our goal is that they are always accessible and so we look very deeply at the institution who will be getting the 100 or 150 books to make sure they have a structure in place that will continue to keep the books accessible to not just the scholarly public but more diverse public.

OY: I would add that this was our mission from the very beginning — from the very first project we agreed that this would be what we would do.

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