

# AMAK MAHMOODIAN

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“I will not make a book just for photobook lovers”

**Amak Mahmoodian** is an artist and educator. She is the author of *Shenasnameh* (2016) and *Zanjir* (2019).

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.

Amak, I've been listening to the Instagram session you did with PhotoWorks the other day, so I'll respond maybe to a few things there but also I'm interested in some of the less commonly discussed aspects of making photobooks — the pragmatics of publishing really. To begin, I'm curious as to what informed your decision to realise both *Shenasnameh* and *Zanjir* in book form?

As you know my work is hugely inspired by archival materials and historical materials, this dynamic of past and present and how we can activate that. So because of the nature of the research and the process of my research it has always been involved with physicality and objects which would pass through time and could have a new life and a new public. So when I thought about what the best way of passing the work to viewers and sharing it with others would be, I thought about the book because of the content of the project and the nature of the project and the way it was structured. Also because of the conversations I had with publishers. That is really important to me because **we have our own abilities to see projects in different platforms but working with someone who sees it as a profession is important.** The feedback I had from publishers, they all directed me to the book and to thinking about the book. It's something that happened maybe five years after *Shenasnameh*. With *Zanjir*, I started working on this in 2002 to 2004 and after 15 or 16 years I started to make the book.

You have spoken before about the feeling that the book offers you a sort of full stop, but we've also spoken previously about how the pandemic has cut short some of the things that you wanted to do with the book, so can you explain a little both about the conclusiveness of publishing but also the work you do after this act too?

It's a very interesting question and I'm so happy to have this conversation with you because I haven't talked about this to people for a while. With *Zanjir* I felt I made something mostly which is a reflection

on me as an artist in exile. For me it was something more than a photobook, that was the reason I invited experts on the diary into the book and also I decided to add another layer to my photographs and in the poems. The reason I brought in these poems and this lyricism to the book is because I thought I could imitate a sort of universal language. We're all connected in some way to poems and poetry and stories, even the stories of our grandparents to calm us down or to take us to bed. The way that I structure the story and put the content together in the book... I wanted my viewers who read the book to engage with it and participate. To become a participant rather than just a passive viewer. That's why the narrative of the book is a circular narrative. At the end I include the first poem so it is the both the beginning and the end. They come together in this place and this time when we are talking about past and present and the moments that create a new narrative between each other. So when I say that the book is a full stop, yes it is for the project but not for engagement with the viewers and the audience. I want to hear their feedback or to see them and talk to them as participants, not just audiences and viewers. I miss that and it's something that I'm still trying to get, even with *Shenasnameh*.

The foundation of working on the next project after *Shenasnameh* was the feedback that I got from people. Because my work tries to really engage the viewer, and I like to engage with people. So that is something that hasn't been done for me yet that with *Zanjir*. And that's why you create a book... you create it and let it go and that is what I love about them, they are quite independent objects. With a gallery it's always someone sitting and explaining the work or there is a statement on the wall and there is an order to start and finish. There are so many potentials with the book and it's really quite interesting for me because it will stand on its own without me or anyone else. It will just be the reader and the book and their imagination.

**Is an imaginary reader, or set of readers, present through the planning and conceptualising of the publication?**

Again this is an interesting aspect that I'm keen to explore. One of the main reasons, and perhaps the

most important reason behind my approach is that my work is mostly about the life that I have led and it is about a very personal story. As an artist there are these contradictions when you create something and these conflicts of feeling when something is very personal and you think 'who would care about it?' and 'who cares about me and this work from 136 years ago'. I am creating this package and I am sending it to people and I want it to be read and not to be miss-read. But then for me **as an Iranian artist, a reading is also informed by the perception of others about me and my identity, my family, my country, my religion. So these things will impact my book and there is no escape from that.** In the way people write about the work and read the book all of these factors can have an impact, so in this way I am aware that I need to create a narrative which could be read in a way that I want it to be read. That's why I put so many different elements rather than just photographs, as I say, I tried to create a package. But really, it depends on the context in which the book will be seen and shown.

**As well as informing some of the conceptual choices you are making — in having a circular narrative, or a layered narrative — does thought about the reader influence the nuts and bolts of publishing too? I think *Zanjir* is in an addition of 900 and *Shenasnameh* was in an addition of 300... are these numbers are reflection on how you think about the intentions of the work or is the increase partly a response to your more established name for the second publication?**

Both of those things definitely helped us make decisions about the books. Mainly it was my publisher's decision, especially with *Zanjir*. With *Shenasnameh* it was because of the project and the ideas and the theme. The project as you remember is quite a dry work. It has quite a dry narrative and we were not sure how successful it would be so that was one of the reasons we decided to go for 300 which is not a huge number. And on the other hand it was the way that I wanted to represent myself as an artist because the project was quite fragile, it was like a treasure. With *Zanjir* it was different because the publisher... first of all they talked about the numbers and they wanted even to have higher numbers because they thought if they were

putting this money and energy in, they wanted to do more than 300 or 500. They thought they could get more out of it because of the success of the previous book. Also its content... it was easier to read and it was possible for it to have a larger audience. So part of it depends on the process of publication but the other part is about what the book contains and what the story of the book is. I think with historical and archival material they have many layers of potential to be read and to be seen in different ways, especially when it comes to the projects or photographs of 136 years ago. So I think all of these things meant that it could have a larger audience... and of course the publisher knew that because that is their job.

**So because of those different levels of possible engagement in the layered narrative, the work is more accessible in terms of its visual content and the language contained within?**

Absolutely. Also, *Shenasnameh* was an expensive book. All the choices in production were significant and important for me. For example the fabric bag which we made for the book, they were all handmade... so that process of producing something to add to the project and the time energy and money, it for sure affected the numbers and the price and many other things.

**I wanted to speak little bit about competitions... I have a list here of the various awards and competitions that you've won or been short-listed for which is quite extensive! And of course the Photo-Text award winner at Arles is maybe the biggest. What do these awards mean to you and how do you think about which awards to submit you work for?**

What it means to me? To be absolutely honest with you Matt, when I came to Bristol and when I came to face the fact that I hadn't been home for 12 years, there was a lot of sadness in me — being isolated and not being with family. It has always been problematic for me as an artist in my own time in

my room when I'm working away. Because part of me thinks 'I haven't seen my family because I use metaphor in my work to talk politically, to talk about politics and what surrounds our life and constructs our identity', and that is my choice but because of this there are so many sacrifices. So the moment of knowing that your work has been chosen and people appreciate it and decide for it to become a winner... it's a great feeling because with all of these sacrifices my work can be seen. In the 70s you had to be huge name to have a photobook and I just really appreciate being seen and being heard. I have paid a huge price of course for that because it's deeply personal and it impacts my life.

When it comes to the competitions, with Arles I found out that the publisher was suggesting it. As you mention, it has been the best Photo-Text book of the year so we had options to choose for which category we submitted it for because they had a few different sections. We analysed and identified the messages of the book and that allowed us to choose that category. You just need to see what the competition is and in which category your work might sit, as well as what you will get. I am quite selective with competitions because as you know there are thousands of them right now. And some of them, they are extremely expensive which I don't agree with and I don't support that... and some of them they have really special looks which I'm not always following. So with competitions I choose the one that suits my projects.

**The average price of photobooks in awards short-lists or end-of-year lists hovers around €40 which could be said to be a restrictive price for those who aren't interested in the medium of the photobook. How much do you think about price with your publications, and when the price is around that mark, are there other ways of trying to expand your readership?**

Yes I totally understand what you mean, especially working with students and I'm sure you have experience with your students. Nowadays often at the end of the student's

time at university they want to create a book. It's kind of a prestige now for photographers to have a photobook and I think that's one of the reasons that it's quite expensive: because they know people who will buy it and people who would support the project. On the other hand my personal feeling... this is strange to say but I had two award-winning photobooks and I make photobooks but I've never been a big fan of photobooks. First of all when I was doing my PhD I could never afford them, I always wanted *Two Rivers* or *Wild Pigeon* [by Carolyn Drake, 2013 and 2014] but I couldn't afford them. The price creates a certain audience and certain buyers for the photobook because it is expensive and some people cannot afford it. But with some projects you really see them as photobooks and it's important that they become a physical object. That is one of the reasons that I work with the book. When I think about the price of books and sending it to the public, I just think I try to make it as general as possible rather than specifically trying to make it for a group of people like a group of collectors or museums.

I think that's why I tried to invite many different visual components into *Zanjir*. For example the cover is related to the mythical stories which belong to the seventh century in Iran, and there is poetry and images. I will not make a book just for photobook lovers. Someone who is interested in poetry or interested in history will get the book and enjoy it too. We don't try to make a book that is expensive and it is something which I think about. For example you could go for a specific cover for the book but it will be €20 more expensive and then so what? No one will want to buy such a small item for €60. So this is the way I try to control the publication and production and making it accessible to the public.

**And you work also with libraries or other places people can access the book without purchasing their own copy?**

I'm always thinking about that Matt. With the first book I started with libraries and I started with people that I knew couldn't afford to buy the book



but I wanted them to see it... and I wanted them to tell me how they felt after seeing the book and reading the book. But then I had no books myself even! It is always in my mind that I start with libraries, because that is where I educated myself as a student and that is something which I will not forget. I want other students to have the same opportunity. Of course I make the book also for the recognition of museums and I am happy when Tate Museum say they want a copy of all of my books — It is a great pleasure, but pretty much all university libraries have my book and if they ask then I send it for free because that is the place where we can educate people and share with people. Especially when the stories are of resistance and identity. My first and most important audience are those people who go to the library, people who are interested in seeing the books and who are not really big, established names with lots of money to buy expensive photobooks. Definitely not them.

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