

# SARAH BODMAN

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“How many copies would you need to change the world? Or is it 300 well placed copies?”

**Sarah Bodman** is a Senior Research Fellow for Artists' Books at the *Centre for Fine Print Research* at The University of the West of England and editor of *The Book Arts Newsletter*.

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.

Sarah, you're involved a great deal in the discourse of artists' books, and the community around that medium, so I wondered how you see the photobook — is it a sub-section, or its own thing?

I think it's quite fluid really. It reminds me of a project I did about 100 years ago when we were looking at trying to bring together more ways of thinking about the book so that people doing print-on-demand or digital could be together... to kind of say that all publications are equal and on the platform of art. So I would say photobooks are their own thing, they are their own genre, but they do fit so easily within artists' books don't they? It's like saying 'a zine is a zine but sometimes it's an artist's book too', it sometimes floats in and out of those borders. It's maybe more about who makes it.

Are such distinctions and discussions useful?

I think they might be useful really more for photographers when they are saying 'this is my practice' as in, 'I am a photographer, this is how I put my work out there'. Anyone can make photographic artists' books but it doesn't make them a photographer. It's that caché... 'this is one output from my practice as a photographer' rather than 'I just happened to take a few photographs and put them in book form'. Like a badge of honour. In the same way that someone might say 'I'm a letterpress printer and I make books', they're defined by process and the fact that they are a master of what they do before they make that thing. Otherwise I could say 'I'm a photographer because I've made photographic books', but I'm not a photographer!

Do you think there has been a conscious effort from photographers then, or publishers, to separate the photobook from other fields of practice — to carve it out as an emerging medium?

I would have thought so... I hope they would have. That's what I mean, you could say it's within the field of artists' publications and you could say it's a genre which could sit in it, or out of it, or in the middle... but I think it's really important that that distinction is there to make photobooks a bigger field rather than just saying it's a subsection. If you think about the photobook fairs, they are actually very different than going to artists' book fairs. 90% of the artefacts there are kind of made in the same process, whereas you could go to an artists' book fair and you might have someone making comics and someone making massive foam press books or disgusting book sculptures. If you were a member of the public and you didn't know what it was and you walked in you could be really confused if you went to an artists' book fair. Whereas if you walked into a photobook fair you would instantly get it wouldn't you? Aesthetically it's that thing... as a genre, photography is photography, and if you walk into a room and you see all these books you can see what's going on.

From what I have seen and read, this shaping of the photobook as something separate, new even, has really resonated with photographers. It has that caché as you say, and appears often to have become the default output for many practitioners...

Just the same as artists' books in a way. It's people going 'OK well this is my work, it doesn't go on the wall, it goes here'. Originally that idea was to reach the masses. But how many do you need to print if you are going to do that? So that's quite a difficult position to be in if you are someone using social documentary to bring awareness to something, but only making 300 copies. How many copies would you need to change the world? Or is it 300 well placed copies? It would be interesting to see where they went afterwards. Because if you only had 300 but they all went to public libraries then that's different to if they are going to 300 photobook collections... you're preaching to the converted, or they might just

think 'oh, great photos' rather than 'oh, now I know that'.

May part of the photobook's success be tied up also in an increasing interest in the analogue, and a certain discontent with the digital, or perhaps we just haven't yet found the best ways of working with screen technology?

Everyone is getting sick of screens!

Is it just that... wanting to dive into something offline, that rejection, or is it also that the book does something for us that can't be replicated?

Of course it does. And I don't think you will find other ways. Digital is great for certain things but not for others. I think things will change again. If kids have grown up reading on screen from a young age, then maybe they'll not need a physical book or a physical photobook, they might think they will have it as an app instead, so I don't know, I think it's too early to say what those changes might be. I read an article ages ago in the Guardian about the death of the book blah blah blah... how it didn't happen and someone was saying that most publishing going digital was a really good idea because all those really shit books that get published on paper don't need to be on paper anymore. So if you want your Jeffrey Archer you can just have it as a Kindle edition and no one's going to be forking out money for a physical copy of it because they don't give a crap. So that swathe of everything going to Kindle has actually made publishers think 'OK, well, what will we publish [physically] then?' And then better things are published on paper because the crap can be dealt with in other ways. Grand generalisations here but lots of new kinds of books came out didn't they... all those re-publications of older books with the fancy covers and the lovely colour edges and that is about the object of desire and you want that book because it looks amazing. There's something of that argument here as well isn't there — that if you saw a great photobook or artist's book or book book you might be like 'yeah I need that and I don't want it on screen, I need it, to hoard it, to have it'.

**If we talk now a little about your relationship to books and collections... I wonder first of all how you categorise books, what sort of systems do you use?**

I don't.

**You don't in that it's organised by when it comes in — the new book takes the next space — or that it's a constantly moving thing?**

I'd say constantly moving. Always, yes.

**Is that because as you return to particular things you're finding new connections that relate to physical spaces and other titles on the shelf or is it less conscious perhaps than that and it's just where it happens to be?**

They never go back in the same place. See those? [pointing] I put stuff there and I put those together because they are by a particular audience, then there will be students who come in and look and things go back in a different place. There is no way on Earth, ever, I would be able to categorise anything. Yeah that's a hard one. I don't know. Digitally, everything I have is in a folder where it belongs. These are all over the shop! All I can say is that I try to keep the artists' books separate from the theory books... but that doesn't work either.

**Is it a collection? A Library? An archive?**

It's an archive. Collection is far too fancy. It's an archive of stuff I've bought or swapped or been given, but its job is for people to visit and students to use. They're for people to borrow if they need to put something together or if they might be running a workshop where they want to teach people how to make books but they don't have any examples of stuff to show them. So that's its job. I think collection is a kind of... 'collection' sounds very grand and thematic whereas this is just organic.

I'd like to turn now to your reading and I'm responding to your interview sheet... one of the things you mentioned is that the first thing you do with a new photobook is flick through from back to front. Then after, you go through in a particular order. What is it that the first flick through does? Is that telling you whether you are going to have the subsequent linear reading — almost a trailer for the book?

Yeah it's weird isn't it... yeah maybe it's a little taster. Why the hell do we always start at the back though? Why do we do that!?

It is strange. At book fairs you always see those first impressions being made on seemingly random pages — new sequences being made by how the reader decides to flip through. Maybe it's a hypertext thing...

Yeah a digital thing, flitting isn't it.

In my interviews, when people do actually spend time with a book beyond this initial impression reading, quite a number commit to going through every single page from left to right...

Yeah I think you should, if someone is asking you to

So you owe it to the author?

Unless the book was really rubbish. If you were reading a novel you wouldn't just skip a chapter and move onto the next one would you? Or say 'oh I'll just read every other page and see what happens'. I wonder if we flip through first because we look at them the same way if as if we were going to buy a novel — you flick over and get that sense, and your little précis. I would never pick up a novel and just flick to the last page!

Do you ever undertake that initial look and then not engage further with the book... you would put it down?

I think by that point... I would have done it before — if it's not for me I probably wouldn't even have picked it up.

**How do you decide to pick it up or not?**

Good question. I don't know, I might not like the look of it or I might assume it's about something I don't agree with. Because I see so many books it's almost like conveyor belt quality control that you get good at. I hate at fairs when you are standing at the table and you have all these beautiful books that people have made and people come up and are chatting to each other. They are literally picking a book up and flicking through it but looking at their friend, It's rude to be so dismissive of people's work. I don't want to do that to someone else if I'm looking around a fair so I think if I've made that judgment that it's not for me and I don't want to engage with it, I don't want to put that person on the other side in the position of me giving a quick look, putting it down and walking away because that's just as rude as those other people. I'd rather... it's probably better to not look than offend I suppose.

**The look and the language of the photobook I'd say are harder to get a sense of from a distance than fifteen or twenty years ago though...**

It's like any book isn't it... you'll guess what it's about and you'll get it or you won't get it but that's your audience isn't it? **Most of us, we're preaching to the converted because all the people who come to those events or fairs or anything generally are there because they want to be there.**

**Is that a problem ?**

I don't think so. I always say at a fair you could lock the doors and keep the public outside and you would do just as well with the other makers buying



stuff. I don't know if that means your audience is more limited but does everyone have to be into it?

**No, I just wonder if the success of books is tied up in being well received by a particular group of people — a limited audience.**

So you'd have to kidnap some other people!

**Or make people look at the photobook without realising that they are looking at a photobook!**

Tell them it's cheese tasting!

**You compare the reading of a photobook with the reading of a novel, watching a film or studying a painting. Could you elaborate on that and whether.... Is it these three combined together or is it an order it happens in?**

I think it's about experience and it's about you spending time with that thing. When you are doing that you are not doing something else at the same time, so it's just one time. There's a really beautiful thesis that John McDowell wrote. His whole thesis was about the experience of the book. He makes artists' books and has even made a photobook but he is talking about that idea of time in books... when you pick the book up you bring everything you know to it. So all your cultural assumptions about the book and how you are going to go through it more or less, and you know you are going to get something from it. So all of that comes with you before you have even picked it up. The book knows what it is and knows how you are going to make that engagement with it. Obviously he said it a lot better and was talking about the idea of time in literature and film and books. It is a suspension of actual time isn't it. So you could be in a novel and ten years could pass in three words. That's what I mean... when you are doing that you are focusing on reading, whether that is visual or

text. If you are looking at a painting or if you are watching a movie, that's it — you are not also on your phone or double checking something on your computer. It is you suspending time. That movie could be five years or that book could be ten years or five seconds. But you are kind of immersed in that experience aren't you? It's the only way I can explain it. I suppose it's about respecting the thing — I've paid to see this movie because I want to see it so I won't sit here reading a book and on my phone at the same time. The same with the book that you wouldn't be doing something else at the same time.

**In your readings are you trying to unpick the message from the author in their use of a particular visual language?**

No not really, it's just about pleasure, that pleasure of experience. Sometimes you might read a book and think, 'well, yeah I think I get it' but then you might go and read all the notes at the end and check that that is what they meant. But yes, **if you are reading a novel or any kind of artefact book, I think you just enjoy it for what it is don't you? It can work on more than one level. You might get to player 3 level but if there is player 4 or 5 level and if you miss that then you still take something away from it.**

**What do you think is happening at the moment in relation to conversations around the photobook? It appears in some areas there is a reluctance to engage with a more focused critical discourse? And if we think of the majority perhaps of the mainstream photobook reviewers and critics, there is an overwhelming positivity about the work that is being written about...**

**You don't hear 'this book's shit!'. It's like anything, any niche, and I put all of us in there. The field doesn't have a vast amount of critics. The whole reason we set up the journal and newsletter and stuff here [The Centre for Fine Print Research at UWE Bristol] was the fact that no one was**

publishing that stuff... loads of people were writing amazing articles on artists' books and being told to go away by journals because they weren't interested. It depends where those critics come from and what their ideas are, but you've got to have academic discussion around it as well, because even in terms of placing that movement in history you can't just go 'oh we don't want academics looking at it or writing anything about it or teaching it' — then what's it going to be? It's almost saying that you are going to be an underground thing and then in 20 years time academics will come along and write about that instead. You need them whether you agree with them or not.

**And what space is there for reading itself in our discourse?**

**There are few places where reading and the experience of reading is the conversation, instead, production and process quite often dominate those discussions.**

That happens a lot yes. That's your job to fix that because yes... **there's always more people out there who will talk about how it was made than why it was made.** Maybe that's because people don't want to look stupid. Because they're too scared to put their ideas forward in case everyone laughs at them and what they thought of it. So they talk about how it's made because they can't get that wrong. It is way more important to see how people experience things. You could be with a group of students who have all seen the same thing and some will say one thing and someone will come along with something else and say 'where did you get that from?' Those voices are important.

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