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“More and more photographers saw the photobook as a viable platform for their own work”

Larissa Leclair is a photography writer, curator and collector of photobooks. She began the *indie Photobook Library* initiative in 2010.

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.

Larissa, you chose to call your initiative a 'library', others have chosen 'archive', or 'collection'... does this choice in naming indicate your intentions with the project?

It was a conscious choice and deliberation for sure. The indie Photobook Library (iPL) was inspired by the Peter Palmquist Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University and the idea that one person could create a collection that added to the history of photography. While that archive is non-circulating, there are curators, scholars, and stewards that actively construct ways to engage with the material. The iPL was also a non-circulating collection, but I wanted to embrace the idea of a more dynamic archive much like the Photo Memory Workshops with Laura Wexler and George Miles at Yale where you are given the space to browse and discover. This mix of non-circulating but interactive was the essence of the iPL through its pop-up traveling exhibitions and events that enabled visitors to browse and stumble upon things, all the while advocating for, and empowering the platform of, self-published photobooks, as well as cataloguing and collecting. The iPL embraced the overlap of the continuum and meaning of both the library and the archive.

In some of those activities the iPL also served one of the functions of a library in being a meeting place for people and ideas. It performs that function alongside being a space for encountering books themselves?

Yes, exactly! The idea was to make a space for people to see these books and to make them accessible; to both inspire and to move past the preciousness of an object with very limited edition sizes or that were out of print (which many of the books in the iPL became very quickly). The idea of a vibrant archive/non-circulating library encouraged people to sit with the books and look at them and experience them. I think it was

successful in creating really one of the only places you could go and see some of these books at that time. This is early on in 2010, 2011 — pre Aperture PhotoBook Award, pre PhotoBook Review. This was still in the days when it was very much traditional publishers and there was hardly a platform for self-published photobooks. Now I think those tables have very much turned.

Back to your question about library and archive... you can think about the general goal and mission for both and there is a balance between accessibility and preservation right? So with the iPL my primary mission was exposure and interaction and making it accessible. And places like Yale and Beinecke are now the ones to preserve them.

This acquisition of the library by the Beinecke means a transition to the iPL's remit then... it changes the model of access for the works collected?

It was always my idea to ultimately place the collection somewhere. The timing, however, speaks to the influence the iPL had. More and more independent collections started popping up and doing similar things to what I was doing: photobook-focused exhibitions and itinerant spaces. More institutions and museums were paying attention and collecting. So my role in many ways was successful because in my opinion it legitimised the platform of self-publishing and self-publishing very much became part of the photobook dialogue. It wasn't just some subsidiary artistic expression, self-published photobooks really started to influence and drive design choices for the larger photobook world. Even in the 7 years of the iPL the photobook world changed for the better in my opinion.

So in 2016, I decided to look at the iPL collection as this piece of history; a piece of history in direct conversation with earlier artists and photographers and collections like the Franklin Furnace Artist Book Collection founded by Martha Wilson (now affiliated with MoMA). The iPL at Yale is a closed collection so they're not continuing to collect for the iPL, but some archivists and librarians are now purchasing these kinds of books. So you have librarians purchasing the

books from photobook competitions and they're going into circulating collections, or you have the museum libraries which are purchasing them... you have curators looking at specific artists who are self-publishing and they are looking at their larger body of work as an artist. Yes, by putting the collection at Yale and at the Beinecke it changes access... it goes back to the archive and my critique on it being somewhat inaccessible... but it's there and it's there forever. I'm much more interested now in the longer legacy of it and that snippet of photobook history: what was going on and who the players were. Collectively we have added our voices to the history of the photobook and photography.

As you say, in the seven year period of the iPL the rise in self-publishing is clear, but are there trends within self-published books — in design, in production or even subject that you saw?

Definitely. You could see the Dutch, for example, with a very strong design aesthetic which translated and influenced other artists living in other parts of the world. I'd say England/Britain had its own aesthetic — more specifically in the photography and type of photography that was percolating to the top. You certainly had outliers and singular people in other parts of the world feeling like they were on their own, doing their own thing and being influenced by the iPL platforms and other self-publishers connecting and having a dialogue. I know in those early days a lot of people used the iPL to find out where to get things printed, or bound; the nuts and bolts of production and learning from direct examples.

So now, ten/eleven years later, those early pockets of self-publishers and creative influencers have gotten larger and you've got hubs like Yumi [Goto] in Tokyo and Hydra in Mexico City and Bruno [Ceschel] with SPBH and Daniel [Boetker-Smith] with the APPA. These people are all over the world and they are equally influencing what is happening. I would say it's still seemingly very much Western or European in terms of people who are making the selections or writing, making

recommendations or even publishing anthologies of photobooks or histories of photobooks in other parts of the world. But we're slowly getting there. Deborah Willis recently guest edited issue 18 of The PhotoBook Review (Fall 2020). Little by little we are expanding the canon.

With the iPL there's the collection, and then there is everything that sat on top or augmented it... were there particular initiatives or strategies that you worked on that were particularly successful? Especially with the remit of the iPL as one to showcase photobooks that aren't 'readily viewed by the general public'?

Early on the audience was obviously other photographers. At the first iPL event in 2010 in Toronto Alec Soth was there and he was just looking at everything and finding new work and finding new books and just being inspired and really actively engaged in the collection. I'd say having a pop-up library, or an event or exhibition where the books are on the wall; there was a very apparent shift in mindset at that time. More and more photographers saw the photobook as a viable platform for their own work and you could bypass a traditional publisher and self-publish. Aside from the public spaces, I wrote about my favourite self-published photobooks in international magazines and for TIME, as well as lectured at universities and photobook festivals worldwide. Now I'm also engaged with collectors and curators to support artists and shape collections. But I have no idea how to reach outside of our little photoworld bubble and I also wonder whether outside, some of the pieces that are created ... do they even make sense to the general public?

In 2019 I lectured at the regional SPE conference in Richmond, Virginia suggesting other avenues aside from the photobook fairs to reach a larger audience and one of those ideas was to attend the Association of Librarians annual conference as a vendor... to directly market your work to those who are buying. I mean even that was a novel idea. Instead of marketing your books to other

photographers, market them to people who are purchasing them for collections. I've expanded that conversation recently in April 2021 at Yale University and the panel specifically focused on collecting entities within just that one university and how to make those connections. I do find it fascinating how there is hardly any crossover into much more mainstream audiences. I'd say maybe TIME Magazine's end of the year photobook list tries to do that, but who else is following the Aperture PhotoBook Award list other than photographers, artists and curators? I think it's rare but I guess it depends on subject matter.

You mention the crossover and whether the way these books are constructed are easy for others to engage with. When I spoke to Lesley Martin she talked of an increasing sophistication of the photobook and how those that are in the photobook world know how to read them and enjoy their intricacies and references but maybe it doesn't always translate outside? We also have to figure out whether there is even any desire for photobook makers and photographers to speak to people outside the photobook and photography ecology? There doesn't seem to a great urgency?

Yes, I agree. The most successful crossover for the iPL was at FotoWeek DC where the exhibitions were in retail spaces in a very urban area. It was in Georgetown and anyone could walk off the street and stumble upon something rather than it being specific to a photobook fair or museum or library. So there was a chance you would engage with someone who would never usually have approached the work. I wish more people outside the photobook and art community would choose to learn about the world and themselves through art. The opportunity for self-introspection, curiosity, discussion of history or current events or personal trauma that is explored in a photograph or photobook is an amazing way to approach life. And I wish more people could experience that for sure.

The iPL provided a space for books be read for free, but when I looked through the archives, over the 7 years there were increasingly few books under the \$20 mark and I know from some of my research that averages in awards and end-of year lists are also well North of this price point. I wondered if we are pricing ourselves out of many possibilities for engagement with a broader public?

Yes that's a good question, a really good question. I think plenty of wealthy people also don't buy photobooks though. Speaking to your point of cost, the \$10 zine you don't even have to think about the purchase, but if it's a \$120 book then it is a much more conscious purchase, and then if you have a specific budget, do you buy one book or do you buy a handful? I don't know. We want an audience who can afford a \$500 book or \$2500 piece of artwork... and they are there, but how do you engage them as an artist...

Well maybe also how do you work with cheaper publications alongside 'ideal editions' to engage those collectors and that market – potentially to help fund the zines, newspaper prints and more low-fi productions to be able to engage with another audience...

To talk a little more about that... I mean the book is the cheapest price point for an artist, so even if it's \$120 as a book, it's cheaper than purchasing a print. I don't know how much lower you can go for artists to make it enticing for people to support them and purchase something. But you are right, even within the book form you have the zine or larger print runs that are cheaper and you have the next level which maybe has a different cover or extra components and it's more expensive, and then there's another tier which has a print and so on which can make publishing a bit more economical. There are so many different ways to talk about cost or price. In the whole scheme of art collecting, books are very cheap to purchase.

You describe the iPL as reflecting a ‘moment and a movement’ in publishing. I wonder now that you have more distance from it — do you feel that moment has passed, or is it still developing?

I do think there was something happening from 2005-2009. It was much easier to follow who was doing what and to try and keep track of everything that was going on. Now... there are just so many people self-publishing which is fantastic. So I did see more and more people deciding that if publishers weren't interested then they could still do it. And that inspired more people to have the same thought. So much so that going to a publisher wasn't even their first thought — they were excited about self-publishing rather than needing a publisher. I think that change happened during the lifetime of when the iPL was collecting. I do think the iPL came around at the right time and really tried to collect history and this mind shift as it was happening. I feel the iPL helped ground self-publishing. Self-publishing has exploded... so much so that everyone complains about the book lists at the end of the year. On the one hand it is great because it gives us an opportunity to see all the books that have resonated with people, but on the other hand I haven't seen many of them, whereas ten years ago it was easier to manage the photobooks published each year.

We've talked a little about photobook-specific, or art-specific libraries and collections, I am keen to hear if you think there is a place for photobooks in public libraries (outside big cites in particular)?

Maybe there should be right? If we go back to your question about how to reach outside of our little bubble, maybe that's what is needed. But then again you go back to budgets and those librarians are making choices on what they are spending their yearly budget on. It would be fantastic to have more photography books in libraries. The ones you tend to see are

more reference or research books or else by more mainstream photographers. Where is that point where somebody gets introduced to photography or the photobook? Maybe it is the regular library. I don't know if the general town library has the potential to reach lots of people when it comes to their photobook holdings. Maybe it does, I love the library and I use the library all the time as a great place just to browse and get lost and find something new. And the iPL is there at the Beinecke for now and for the future for you to visit in New Haven. And I will continue to place artists' work in museum and library collections.

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