

# MICHAEL MACK

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“... the image can and should have a socio-political value beyond the space of the market”

**Michael Mack** is a publisher (MACK books) whose catalogue include established names as well as emerging artists and theory books.

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.

Michael, I've started by asking a few people about the value of the term photobook, because it seems as though this term relates to a lot of different histories, yet we've arrived at a place where we just use photobook. How useful do you find the term?

I mean, etymologically it's interesting, But for me it's a touchstone for a much bigger problem, which is the ghetto of the photobook – the niche market space. Everybody is rallying around the photobook flag and it's a dead end in my opinion.

Do you think if we might return to acknowledging where the photobook comes from, and different reasons to publish, we might be better off? Like purposes of publishing in the history of the photo-essay, the artists' book and the photographic book?

I would agree, but I'd also suggest that there is perhaps a step back prior to this, which is the fact that the whole photobook space is significantly enmeshed into the collectors' marketplace. It is almost driven by that marketplace. So, first and foremost, there is the overlaying of a notion of financial valuation. This is why **content-driven ideas have become secondary: because the primary interest is the marketplace. For me, it's not what publishing is about. Publishing is about audiences.** The photobook now is predominantly driven by collectability. A lot of stories are difficult, complex, sociological tales which might not be ideal in the confines of the current photobook market, which would want to make luxury objects out of those sorts of stories. Your delineation of those particular strands is intelligent but it also signifies how much we have lost clarity in terms of the possibilities of a relationship between photography and the book form.

Does that suggest that our measures of success and what we deem to be good is entirely caught up with that art market, and a desire to legitimise these pieces of work as art objects do you think?

Yes, partly I do. I think that validation is required, but that's my point. It's not necessarily just the art market, it's secondary trading too. Whilst I've benefited enormously in business terms from the whole collectors' realm there is nothing that drives me more crazy than people buying two copies, one to keep in the shrink wrap to sell, and the other probably also in the shrink wrap as well. They are doing it because they've read somewhere it is the next hot thing. They are not actually connecting to the content at all.

**Is there a place for a shift from an emphasis in production towards readership?**

I do think it has changed in more recent years, although you do still see a lot of books led by design and frankly lacking in substance – signifying very little. There has always been this issue with photography and the 'beautiful print'. Photographers are tech geeks. When you take them into the space of the museum, it emphasises the notion of the value of the archival print, the platinum print, and sets up all these calibrations of value and worth. Whereas photography is not about that. It's actually about the absolute opposite: it is about reproduceability and the fact that the value is not held in that object. And of course there's Walter Benjamin and so on but yes, it's about the image that can and should have a socio-political value beyond the space of the market. The reason I was interested in publishing instead of exhibitions and curating was because of that possibility of disseminating ideas in a democratic way. Yet what the photobook market has done is reversed that by investment in terms of the market value of a collectible item. That is also, as you say, increasingly predicated on the print value, or the extraordinary slip case, or the three-volume edition: all these other factors that take you further and further away from the simple, straightforward ideas and the judgement of the content.

**When you spoke with Lens Culture about a goal to have fewer titles but much bigger print runs, lowering cost and increasing access... these aren't sentiments that I've come across a great deal in my research. Do you feel that you are pushing against the established discourse with what you're trying to do?**

I don't want to set up some notion that we are outside or particularly different. Our position is that the focus should be more on accessibility, and that's one of the reasons I rail a little bit against photobook culture even though we play a role in it. I am more interested in much bigger audiences for my authors than the 500 or so people across the world who will buy most books published in the photobook realm. And it is almost literally that – as you probably will have assessed by the print runs that publishers work on.

Sometimes there seems to be a little bit of snobbery in places about larger editions and the larger audiences?

I think the approach that the photobook world has to the market is that, 'we know one another, that's sufficiently large, we can play in this space and that's great, that's enough.' For me, it is just not. It's not enough.

With the photobook becoming an important career step within photography, is it more difficult to get people to see that insularity?

Yes. I feel that there's a real danger in the notion that just because you publish your book that means you 'exist'. It doesn't. It's one of the dangers of the space and just one of the pitfalls of the photobook market.

When it comes to quality, do you see that also as a barrier for the photobook? As photographers often want the highest quality printing, the highest technical quality of publication... there might sometimes be a missing space for the lower quality publications, more rudimentary in their construction and put out to bigger audiences? Or even tiered publications – trying to tap the collectors to fund a bigger edition which is cheaply produced. So there isn't much of that but even in the music industry it has come about...

Production values have become the centre. If you look at some of the retail pricing much of it is absolutely crazy. I buy lots of books to get a sense of the interesting things that are happening, and I'm sent a lot of books, but it's very rare that I will spend more than £50 on something. There is so

much that is so very expensive and of course that's partly predicated on the print runs and the high scale production values. Personally, I don't have a problem with those ambitions. My problem is that very often that attention to detail is obscuring or perhaps cloaking a lack of quality in terms of the content. If the focus is so much on production – that it has to be this paper or this printing, or it has to be printed in this place in Italy or Germany – the result is something that ends up being very expensive but where the fascination is not with the original idea. There is a distinction between the author who has an understanding that they are working toward a reader and are presenting to a reader, and one who is doing something like a 'show and tell' of their work in book form. That is a big distinction and I look for it very carefully when I'm starting to work with people. I look for those people who think 'how can I reach as big an audience as possible with these ideas?' and really get their teeth into that possibility through the book form.

**When you talk in this way about the content or message driving subsequent choices, you are looking at intent – why people are publishing in the first place, and why with the book?**

Absolutely. First and foremost, it is a judgement in advance of that initial meeting – a judgement of the work and the ideas behind it. The initial meetings are to establish whether the person is a good collaborator, and specifically whether they can work with us in order to try and achieve a book that we all think is the best voice or translation for the author's ideas. I make these distinctions because there is the capacity for people to self-publish. Probably the majority of publishing in the photobook realm is self-publishing at the moment, or the equivalent of that, by which I mean paying a publisher twenty-five or thirty thousand Euros to make your book. Some authors want to be able to make all the decisions – to have complete control. That is fine and completely fair but I make clear to people that if they don't want to have discussions about the content and form of their book, to be

challenged, then they should not come to us because that's what we do. It's not everybody's cup of tea.

**When you set up MACK you spoke about it being a time to try something different. I wonder whether you could expand a little about the complex relationship between digital technology and publishing which contributed to this moment, and whether perhaps a rejection or unease with the digital has contributed to the rise of the contemporary photobook?**

I was quite fortunate to leave Steidl when I did. I spent 15 years there making too many books and learning everything that was good and possible about book-making and the book business... as well as the bad. It was a fortuitous moment because it was 2010, when the first iPad was launched. That was the specific juncture and moment at which the notion arose that reading was going to change, that we were going to move to screens alone. Whilst that has happened to some extent, the reality is that that change has re-enforced the possibilities of the analogue object. It's younger generations who appear to be cleaving more directly to the possibilities of ink on paper and the physical form of the book. Obviously, that has directly fed into the explosion of the photobook space.

The other way the digital realm has created the photobook boom is through the possibilities of digital dissemination and digital marketing. It has allowed direct contact between the authors or small publishers like myself and an audience. It's possible to build an audience quickly, driven by the ideas and content of the author. Clearly that has also facilitated the boom of small presses publishing illustrated books — we can build and position ourselves in a way that would not have been possible in 2000, for example. It just wouldn't have been possible to do that without multiple distribution and marketing partners. The third thing is production. The capacity to design and produce from digital tools is now common language among younger generations, so that facility is a part of the whole conversation. It makes it easier for people

going forward to imagine themselves making their own book or making books.

**Do you think there will be an appetite for new investigations into what the digital photobook might be? Maybe we are a little way off that, or there is no interest, or perhaps that area is served elsewhere?**

Well, I started a company alongside MACK called MAPP. I spent a lot of time and money failing in that, in those explorations. Failing not in terms of what we made – we were at the sharp edge of things, and perhaps ahead of the curve in what we were making. We just found there was not the audience for it. There was not the appetite for it. There was for certain books that involved a lot of text, for example, but in large part the most successful things we had were free. Broomberg and Chanarin's War Primer 2, for instance. There is a long history, but that particular book was published in the way it was because of various rights issues in relation to the Abu Ghraib photographs they wanted to use in it. So we published a small handmade edition and at the same time made a free digital edition alongside it. And at the last count I think we had something like 6,500 downloads of that free book. But that's different – giving things away, that's quite easy. It's not really a measure of success, although it is a measure of reach if you like, or interest.

As to the question about whether there is a future – I believe there is, but unfortunately I don't think it's very exciting. You need a homogenised distribution platform, by which I mean one that can access all the 'walled gardens' – whether that's Google or Apple or the devices and hardware of Microsoft. Some people argue that exists already: it's a website. Websites are becoming more and more complex, and perhaps that is one future in terms of storytelling or presenting complex visual content in the digital form. But I have the same impression as you in terms of the enthusiasm for that, which is that there isn't much. There is no emotion; an amazing all singing, all dancing website leaves



even digital natives completely cold. They would much rather see, touch and smell a book.

I don't know about the future but I'm happy not to be mixing in that space. It gives me some faith. It gives me some faith in human nature that we're presented with the idea that 'ink is dead' as a fait accompli and the response of younger generations is to completely ignore that: to take the best of what digital can offer in terms of access, distribution of knowledge, and connection, but still refer back to ink on paper in relation to photography and books and art, as well as reading.

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