

NATASHA CHRISTIA

VIDEO CALL | COVENTRY-BARCELONA | 25.02.21

“By interfering with the book, we create multiples”

Natasha Christia is a curator, writer and educator. She is the author of *The Book: On Endless Possibilities* (2015).

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.

Natasha, a lot of my questions have come from reading your article on the 'potentiality of the photobook'* and one of the things I'm really keen to speak to you about is this assertion that you make which positions the photobook as being a *defunctionalised* form. What is the significance and impact of that situation?

*<https://belphotobooks.org/the-photobook-on-potentiality/>

Boris Groys and his theoretical formulation of the defunctionalised museum object has been quite inspirational to me when it comes to thinking about the photobook. I observe photographers within our community; after years of often non-financed work and effort, their natural desire is to reach the final outcome of their project. As soon as their process is crystallised, and it culminates in something, they are very reluctant to open it up/review/revise/let it go: because it took such a long time to get there. There is a fixation on sacred outcomes which does not allow flexibility or a margin for questions or re-formulations. In its fixed and material properties, the photobook encourages this attitude. This is precisely why in my photobook-based curatorial projects, I like to pose a challenge by encouraging processes and practices that contribute novel perspectives on the idea of finished work, while also providing new points of departure, future stops and chameleonic culminations for a particular project.

I take for granted that the flux of things is a natural living condition, especially today. And yet, in our field, there is still a lack of awareness about how meaning shifts with contexts; books and exhibitions are still perceived as static and rigid formulations. Seen through this perspective, I think that photobooks have been used as a relic or something that legitimises the photographic work itself. I also think at the same time there is a lack of concern towards boosting engagement with photobooks that goes beyond the members of our photobook community. Just take the term 'photobook'; it is misleading because it is very limiting. This is what makes the book for me a

typical defunctionalised object that lies forgotten; a fossilised artefact in a museum vitrine.

There's a lot there for me to pick up on and maybe I'll start with the notion of the book being this thing that photographers are often reluctant to change. I wonder how much of that you think is connected with the fluidity of images online... it seems as though the book is the remaining space in which the photographer has almost complete control over the reading experience?

That's definitely a good point, we use the book as a way to contain and continue our authoritative signature. But I think focusing our attention on the experience the book can provide, or things that can happen around the book, does not cancel the traditional role of the book. There is a misleading belief that if we interfere with something, we cancel it. But this is not necessarily the case. By interfering with the book, we create multiples. Multiples of situations, events and conversations around it. This is particularly relevant in the field of documentary photography. **The book is a space of relations and interactions which can promote learning and encourage situations with communities as it breaks up the passive relationship between reader and writer.** The exploration of this inherent dialectic and democratic aspect of the book is a very interesting aspect to explore further, especially in our era of information bubbles and polarisation.

How a work is funded might also be an influence here. If you are an author making a significant financial contribution towards a publisher I imagine you may be less receptive to hearing other ways of working and possibilities for remixing or re-imagining it at some point...

Yes, definitively. In late 2019, I held a workshop at Zoetrope Athens, in which I was challenging people to share their dummies or published books with one another. The key theme was the reinvention of the photobook and the relations around it. We set one single rule: participants were allowed to interfere in any way they wished with someone else's book. People struggled with this; or thought that intervention should necessary entail a material, disruptive and de-authorising intervention. The point there was to address our limited frame of

thought about how you can interfere with the material and intellectual properties. You don't have to rip something up or make a collage, you can do something around the book, or write about the book. It's not about destruction; it is about engagement and about allowing the space and time for the other to come close, to relate with care, to understand, to bridge, to destabilise convictions, and to embrace contradiction, ambivalence and alterity.

Do you think that the discourse that exists around photography, but more specifically the photobook, needs to shift to address the impact, the amplification and the activation of work? At the moment that doesn't really exist... If we look at best-of lists or prizes or reviews there is seldom any mention of distribution tactics or workshops or even basic things like cost and the ease of distribution? Or are there other interventions to help the photobook become more social, less static?

This is such a great idea! I think you should talk about this with organisers of photobook awards. It's really interesting to take into account a measure of impact at least in terms of reaching people and activating the book. When it comes to activation, the panorama within our photo communities is so meagre. It usually involves the typical book launch (during which people talking about their work in front of other people), and selling books. These are fine, but looking for more active ways to engage people with the work can be relevant and beneficial on many levels (in financial terms, in terms of communicating the work, and in terms of creating a sense of community or interaction around it). Receiving funding to help get books into public, university and school libraries can also be crucial, and this is something we really miss here in South Europe where institutional support is practically zero. Besides this, on an individual level, there is no recipe for how to do things.

There is also a grave lack of knowledge around the history of photography and related mediums. People come up with an idea and think they are the first to do it, but they are not. If you look at film theory or philosophy or literature, you will find so many interesting parallels and resources, experiments of narrative structure, situations and

relations around the book that took place more than a century ago. Think of Mallarmé, think of Chris Marker, think even of Ulysses Carrión and his *New Art of Making Books* back in 1975 (how many people are actually familiar with his manifesto?). Think of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay who is currently contributing a lot to the way we understand, relate and read images. I think we should integrate photobooks in a broader spectrum of theoretical reflections and practices; we should develop a practical and relational philosophy around our medium.

And so the veneration of the photobook and the photobook becoming a reflection of itself is a by product? Is this a result of photographic curricula, photobook-specific events and photobook study that have often sought to look at the subject separated from communications studies, literature, film and so on?

Yes, I agree, and there is certainly an issue around our visual education. We produce and consume images all the time on our phone and computer screens. And yet, our vocabulary and the way we perceive images as signs of communication are still informed by mid 20th century practices and views on the medium. Education about media arts or culture and arts needs to be broad and eye-opening. Many photographers do not even have any basic knowledge of film history and theory which has contributed so much to photography, and in this sense, they might be missing the necessary context to understand how documentary has evolved. Photobook reviews of photobooks reflect our limited cognition, resources and views. **At the beginning I considered it a handicap not being a photographer myself, but now I consider being an outsider a privilege. I avoid being so contaminated by the medium.** All of my outsider tools have been really helpful for me when it comes to dealing with images and reading them; they help me see and think beyond images and photography.

Do you think there is a desire in a broader public to engage with some of the more avant-garde photobooks that are coming out? Because of course one challenge is to get the photobook to new readers so they can actually engage with the physical thing, and then there's the challenge of its visual language.

In cinema you have space for experimental film — a consolidated field even in film and TV online platforms. When it comes to our field, it is essential to get over prejudices about the democratisation of books and the reading of photography in terms of 1930s magazine documentary work. One thing does not cancel the other. I would encourage us to adopt novel points of view and experiment with narratives, get over the same patterns. I also assume that not all books are meant to be read by thousands of people. There has to be an honesty in what we're doing.

If our current language remains, and continues to develop, then activation of the book and giving people a way into those publications becomes even more important, but this is counter to some of the security of the photobook ecology and the market...

It is very complicated not to become part of the market side of the community; we need to finance and promote our work. Even in my own projects — I really want to start to work with a bit of financial backing for long-term projects. You can do that with institutions but then you enter into the institutional area and you no longer maybe have some freedom... and you have a different set of issues. I don't have an answer for this but I really admire people who have their own practice and do not comply with how things are typically established. What happens in our field now is that people expect automatic validation and recognition of their work. I have a feeling that in 100 years many of the names that are relevant today will be completely forgotten and there will be other works that will be praised. The real work takes place in a very silent way. It requires long-term, constant and coherent engagement. Right now our marketing

view is overly extroverted for my taste, with people shouting about having their first or next publication released, and reinforcing a network of connections just for the sake of being in the right place and with the right people. The demand of the market for visibility raises many delicate decisions that revolve around ethics and accountability and issues of character, and of how genuinely we are committed to the contents we produce . All these issues have to be tackled on an individual level.

Is the activation of the photobook something for publishers to take up, or the authors?

Well, I don't think it is exclusively upon publishers to undertake such an endeavour. We should consider their point of view. They are companies with financial obligations and logistic tasks. I would connect this operation much more with practitioners... with artists and also people like me: curators, educators, appropriators, theorists. It is also the responsibility of institutions and festivals to think outside the box, to encourage others to do so, and to facilitate and back up financially the realisation of projects/situations of activation and interdisciplinary dialogue.

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