

Photobook phenomenon: an interview with Moritz Neumüller

João Queiroz

FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF JUIZ DE FORA

ORCID: 0000-0001-6978-4446

Ana Luiza Fernandes

PONTIFICAL CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

ORCID: 0000-0003-3598-2916



Moritz Neumüller. © Photo by Verónica Losantos.

Moritz Neumüller, PhD. (b. Linz, Austria, 1972), is a curator, educator, and writer in the field of Photography and New Media. He has worked in research and management positions for international institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, La Fábrica in Madrid, and PhotoIreland in Dublin. His publications include *Martin Parr's Best Books of the Decade* (2011), *To Have & To Lose* by Mireia Sallarès (2008), *All Inclusive: New Spanish Photography* (2007), *Bernd & Hilla Becher Speak with Moritz Neumüller* (2005), *El otro lado del alma* (2005), and the catalogue of the *Daegu Photo Biennale* (2014) in Korea. Neumüller is a regular contributor to the *Eu-*

This interview was made by João Queiroz and Ana Luiza Fernandes in February and March 2021.

ropean *Photography Magazine* and a member of the editorial board of the encyclopaedia project *The European History of Photography*. He is currently chief curator of the Photobook Week, Aarhus, Denmark. Recent curatorial projects include the exhibition “Photobook Phenomenon” at CCCB Barcelona, and the edition of *The Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture*, published by Taylor & Francis (2018). Since 2010, he runs The Curator Ship, a platform that provides useful information for visual artists.

Links:

<http://thecuratorship.org/>

<https://photobookweek.org/>

<https://artecontacto.wordpress.com/>

1. The photobook phenomenon is not historically new – it appears at the beginning of photography. According to Badger (2015)¹, photobooks exist “almost since the birth of photography in 1839, the photobook was invented more or less as a publishing medium, and Victorian pioneers, such as Anna Atkins and William Henry Fox Talbot, were starting to stick photographs into albums and books around 1843.” How to explain recent and increasing interest in the phenomenon, in academic and book market areas?

Yes, the photobook as a medium is as old as photography itself, and your examples show this very clearly. And for some photographers (especially in countries such as Japan), the book has always been a more important form of presentation of a body of work than the exhibition. What we have called the Photobook Phenomenon is, however, the rediscovery of the medium in the early 2000s, after a 20 year beauty-sleep. Remember that the 80s and 90s of the last century were a time of *hausse* on the art market and the integration of photography – finally – into the art world. So the formats became bigger and bigger, in an attempt to resemble paintings and to be taken seriously in a museum context. Only at the end of the 1990s, when this inferiority complex had finally been overcome, researchers and practitioners started to place their bets again on printed matter. Horacio Fernández’s seminal exhibition “Fotografía Pública: Photography in Print 1919–1939”, at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid had an impact that has been widely recognised as a paradigm shift, a catalyst and an inspiration for further research on the subject. Martin Parr went to see this show in Madrid and it

¹ See Badger (2015), *Why Photobooks are Important* <https://revistazum.com.br/en/revista-zum-8/fotolivros/>

spotted his interest. Together with people like Andrew Roth, who came from the world of literature, interestingly, it was people like Parr and Fernández who saw the potential and started to collect books on a large scale. When Phaidon invited Parr to do a book about photobooks, he proposed Gerry Badger as the writer and co-producer, and Gerry's quote comes from this context already, from the first volume of their monumental research on the History of the Photobook. Interestingly, most of the "books on books" that followed were centred on regional contexts: the Dutch photobook, the Latin American photobook, the Chinese photobook, and so on. It seems we still need these national contexts in order to order, categorise, and explain artistic developments and trends.

In parallel to this historic and curatorial work, the photographers themselves rediscovered the book as an excellent tool for what is now called "storytelling", and, together with great designers, they produced some of the most astonishing publications in the last 10 or 15 years. When we speak of a phenomenon, thus, it must always take these two, or maybe even three strands into account: academia, artistic practice, and the market.

2. The term photobook (or photographic book) has been used to designate a phenomenon that includes an extensive and varied set of photographic publications, including various forms of creation, printing, and dissemination of photographic material. What is the distinction between photographic catalogues, or photographic albums, and photobooks? What is the most relevant conceptual difference? (Or, are there, in your opinion, any interesting theoretical or historical operational criteria to distinguish these categories? Is this distinction important?)

José Luis Neves has written his dissertation on these distinctions and definitions and he would be the perfect person to answer your question. However, I believe, he also would be careful not to draw all too rigid lines, because it is exactly the cases at the borders, or those that fall in more than one category that tend to be the most interesting works. Generally speaking, photobooks have been responsible for a good part of shifts of style and content matter in the history of photography, especially in between the 1950s and the 1970s, the "golden age" of the photobook. And the mentioned "books on books" are often a kind of treasure hunt, driven by the passion to discover rare works, mixed with the passion of the academic scholar for the new and unknown. Unfortunately, the fact that some books (and many others not) get "rescued" and recognized as master works, does not mean that they become more accessible for the general public. In fact, the scarcity remains or gets worse, once such a book makes it into the canon. And some of these

findings are doubtlessly photographic books in a wider sense, such as company books, medicine atlases, propaganda books, and so on. Photographic albums and catalogues, which you mention in this context, can of course be outstanding and interesting works, especially from a historic perspective.

3. Can the phenomenon be considered a subfield of the Artist's Book?

Just as photography can be much more than art, photobooks can be a subcategory of artists' books, but they can be also a democratic medium of communication, with a non-artistic mission. In other words, there is an intersection between what we consider photobooks and artists' books, and these are photobooks that were made with an artistic intention. Travel books, company books, photographically illustrated science and history books and the like can be (or become) very interesting artefacts, and quite often, they were made by experienced visual artists. Think of propaganda books during the Spanish Civil War, for example. Both sides employed the latest technologies and best craftsmanship to communicate their cause. The same is true for the books made by the Italian and Portuguese Regimes in the 1930s, and the Japanese protest books in the 60s.

4. But our main interest here (in this 'special issue') are the photobooks of literature. They can be described as complex networks of verbal text, photography, and other visual entities and processes. Their organization is characterized by what can be defined as a dense collaboration between complex semiotic systems. Prose and poetry, graphic design, typography, syntactic-visual distribution of all the printed components, in short, all components seem to be decisive for its conception, on the one hand, and to interpretation, on the other. What is your opinion, in general terms, about this subcategory of photobooks?

What I find fascinating is the different ways of how images and text tell stories. Besides literature of poetry, the narrative structure of the photobook has also been compared to film. Lev Manovich reminded us of Dziga Vertov's claim that film can overcome its indexical nature through montage by presenting a viewer with objects that never existed in reality. The same is true of the indexicality of photography, as well as other long-discussed semiotic and ontological questions about the medium. They lose their importance when the image becomes part of a stream of consciousness, a narrative structure, a filmic, or text-like experience that allows us to be truly "in the picture", in the same way as Jackson Pollock wanted to be absorbed by his paintings, or how we become the main characters of books when we read

them. Telling a story by turning the pages is a simple, yet profoundly powerful way of making them speak to us. Composition, light, depth of field, colour, all the aspects we tick off when describing a great picture become secondary when the images become discursive, in pairings or sequences. Just as we have to string together our ideas in order to communicate them to others in a language, we can sequence images “hanging out to dry on a clothes-line”, to use Suzanne K. Langer’s metaphor from the 1940s.²

Langer thought that, even if they are nested, we have to string our ideas in order to communicate them to others in a language: You place one piece of language at a time into a straight line; at the end of the process the parts add up to a whole argument or proposition. Doesn’t that remind us of how photobooks tend to be constructed?

5. In photobooks of literature, at least two systems (or processes) are densely related – verbal (prose or poetry) and photography. Verbal system seems to be linked to the photographic image in a bidirectional interaction – mutually modulating influences connecting the word and the photographic image. A lot of discussion happens about what could be the best way to approach (to explain, to model) this kind of interaction. This discussion is spread over many levels, and at different scales of observation – historical, sociological, technical, cognitive, semiotic, etc. What is your opinion about this problem?

My opinion is that there are probably as many relations between text and image as there are books that employ them. Very few photobooks work completely without text. And those that do, such as *COMMON SENSE*, by Martin Parr, contain quite a lot of images with text in (or on) them: posters, billboards, price tags, even tattoos are used to communicate text, through a photographic record of it. On the other hand, early writing systems, such as the Kushim Tablet of Uruk Period (c. 3400–3000 BC), use symbols that are not abstract, but very visual, very iconic. By 2500 BC, Sumerian kings were using cuneiform to issue decrees, priests were using it to record oracles, and citizens were using it to write personal letters. At roughly the same time, Egyptians developed another full script known as hieroglyphics, which are picture codes as well. Think about Chinese characters, which often reveal their meaning, and the scripts developed in Central America around 1000–500 BC: They all are based on a polisemantic mode of interpretation.³

² See Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957 [1941].

³ See Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, London: Harvill Secker, 2013.

What I want to say is that the relation of text and image is as old as writing drawing, and that photobooks that play with text are just special cases of an ancient pattern.

6. Could you mention some examples in which this kind of mutually modulating influence produces more interesting results? Examples that do not exhibit unidirectional dependency between the coupled systems (photographic image → word OR word → photographic image)?

The territory shared by text and image is the playground for scholars such as Federica Chiochetti, who has a background in comparative literature, and developed her interest in photography through literature. Overwhelmed by photography theory, she felt the need for a more playful and experimental way to engage with her research and set up the photo-literary platform Photocaptionist to promote the “concubinage” between photography and literature, images and words. Together with her and the Greek curator Alexandra Athanasiadou, we are creating a new image-text platform that touches not only on image-text and photo-text intersections after the pictorial turn, but also help to build networks between writers and image-makers.

I tend to prefer those projects where text and image have an interesting relation and avoid tautological or circular relations. When image captures become discursive elements, instead of just describing what we already see, yet without relieving the viewers from their own interpretations of the images, and their relations. Also, when there is collage and texts within the photographic images. I also like the idea that we can become the custodians of our own museum/library by collecting books in general, and even more with photobooks and artist’s books: by means of collecting certain types of literature, bookworks, or documents, you propose a discourse, a way of seeing the world. If you take the idea that personal libraries can be museums in themselves further, it can also help to understand the minds of great artists, especially those of photographers-collectors who gathered masterpieces over time by means of buying and exchanging with other artists.

Libraries show the tastes of their owners, as sources of information, inspiration and criticism of their work. In fact, Horacio Fernandez claims that libraries are portraits of their owners, their biography, and their connection to the outside world. In other words, the Janus-faced nature of the photographic book becomes especially evident in libraries, as Douglas Crimp famously recounts in two cases from the New York Public Library. The first is that of a librarian who gathered books illustrated with photographs from

throughout the library's many different divisions and "made the library realize for the first time that it owned an extraordinarily large and valuable collection of photographs, until then thoroughly dispersed throughout the library's extensive resources". The second is a personal anecdote about finding Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* "miscatalogued" and placed alongside books about automobiles and highways. While Crimp's first reaction was to claim that, as a work of art, it belonged in the art division, he then changed his mind: "I now know that Ed Ruscha's books make no sense in relation to the categories of art according to which art books are catalogued in the library, and that that is part of their achievement".⁴

7. In a recent interview (2017) you emphasized the role of the materiality of the book as part of a multimodal experience that characterizes the photobook. But digital platforms allow you to explore many intermedia properties, including interactivity with other media and hyperlinks. What are your impressions on this branch of development?

Context is a key factor for the interpretation of the book: meaning is attached to the medium, in terms of size, materiality, and narrative flow. The personal reading experience depends on factors such as the weight, smell and texture of the paper, and the turning of a page reveals metaphoric and material connections throughout the book. Without these experiences and connections, what used to (and should) be defined by the artist, and the viewer, is now adapted to the screen size of our technical devices, and "our" choices are made by algorithms that have been optimized for profitability of a few Silicon Valley corporations.

I am not saying that digital platforms and social media photography are less important in our contemporary world, or anything like that. My dissertation was about semiotics of hypermedia, and I am very interested in how artists use the internet to create new works that could not even exist outside cyberspace. Marco de Mutiis, Katrina Sluis, and Jon Uriarte are curators that work on the forefront of this kind of photographic expression. However, just as we have to be critical about art institutions and their role, we should be even more careful with Google, Facebook, and all other companies that use our data, including our creative work, to feed their algorithms and own our digital lives.

Furthermore, I am fairly critical of those who think that a discussion of a certain theme (or image) should consist in wildly calling out, cancel or

⁴ See Douglas Crimp (1989), "The Museum's Old / The Library's New Subject," Ed. Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989, 3-14.

even censor, and that insulting other people is a valid way of expressing one's point of view. If visual studies have taught us anything at all, it would be that a single reading of any image simply does not exist, and that visual literacy does not denote the ability to read pictures correctly, or quickly, or even in great quantities, but to be willing to accept multiple readings of the same image. We must therefore not be judged for our condition and the knowledge that leads us to our own reading, but by our ability and willingness to accept other readings, and learn from the differences between the two. No lecturing, no threats or accusations via Twitter will make viewers change their instinctive interpretation of visual information, only the empathic comprehension that other views may exist and that they can enrich our own understanding. Or, as Azu Nwagbogu has recently put it: we have to learn again to listen to each other.

8. Do you think there is, at this moment, any special domain where the production and experimentation of photobook is advancing in a more surprising way?

Well, 2020 has of course been a difficult year for photobooks as much as for any other creative field, and for all of us. I believe that the artistic community has largely understood that we are living now in a new era, and that the Anthropocene is not just another fancy hashtag. We have an important role, as artists, curators, communicators, intellectuals, academics, students to help prepare the world for this dystopic and difficult time. Why? Because we are privileged in the system, we have a moral obligation to help other people understand that what is at stake here is not the planet – our planet will survive us – but our very own species. If we do not change the way we live in a radical way, our children will suffer consequences beyond our imagination. Thus for me, beside projects that fight for more social and racial justice, or those that take the questions of gender and identity seriously, it is those projects and books, and exhibitions and initiatives that talk about these new challenges are the most interesting.

9. You were one of the curators of the biggest exhibition ever held on photobooks (“Fenómeno fotolibro”, 2017, Barcelona). More than 500 titles were exhibited, carefully selected and grouped in thematic axes. What motivated the realization of the project and what impact has it had, in recent years, in photobook research and creative production?

I think that the main merit of the show was that it showed the historic and contemporary phenomenon to a broad public. Together with other initia-

tives that have promoted self-publishing and bookmaking in the last decades, this exhibition has shown the possibilities, and also the variety of the movement, if you want to call it that way. We proposed different ways of looking at the historic materials, especially books that were not intended as artistic expressions, and mapped the field, within an international scope. While we have seen a flattening of the curve of published photobooks per year now, it is still clear that many photographers want to use the traditional book form to present their work. Their experimentation and creativity still drives the medium towards its own boundaries, and hybrid forms with digital media are starting to become viable. Think of books such as *The Migrant* by Anaïs López – a book, app, film, play. It ticks many boxes, and it works. Or the integration of VR and AR, such as Monica Alcazar-Duarte's *The New Colonists*. If roads are being made by walking, to use Machado's famous phrase, these artists are just beginning to show us hidden paths off the beaten track, until others will follow and these hybrid forms will become more mainstream. I am very excited about all these new possibilities, and I love to help artists to find their own way of using photography as a means of artistic expression, as an educator, writer, and curator.

© 2021 João Queiroz and Ana Luiza Fernandes.

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).