

Experiments with the Academic Book

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My research on the photobook and my teaching practice at Coventry University on the BA Photography programme has led to numerous interactions with, and a questioning of, the role of the academic book in a post-digital landscape. It has been for a number of years a self-appointed (and recently formally recognised) core of my practice to better aid students' reading in the many guises this can take – from consideration of networked conversations on Twitter to the comprehension and enjoyment of significant books, and even the exploration of narrative with a literal tearing up of a classic photobook. These diverse experiences with the 'book', (a term used in its loosest manner), has led to the creation of ebooks, ibooks, posters, leaflets, artists' books and monographs, all with readership and pedagogy in mind. Outside of my teaching role there is no respite from reading and the book — I am a PhD student with *bookRoom* at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, working towards a thesis on the disjuncture between production, intent and outcome of the post-digital photobook.

In this piece I present three initiatives that propose new ways to think about the academic book at a time of great change in education and publishing. We only need look to the marketisation of the University resulting in increasingly aggressive recruitment tactics, space demands and partnerships to get a sense of the former and the semi-revival of the physical book, popular use of print-on-demand technology, and worrying trends of reader data collection for the latter. Changes naturally can also be seen in the academic book, which is enjoying a healthy introspection (visible of course here in this BOOC – Book as Open Online Content) with a questioning of access, revenue, engagement and form.

These *initiatives*, or *reactions* are to be seen as active responses to the status quo — they seek to practically challenge particular issues faced in the academy and in relation to the book — from library engagement to the difficulties of speaking about experience. None of these initiatives are positioned as blueprints for success but instead contain within them ideas and ways of operating with the academic book, which have proved valuable for learners whilst also meeting the needs of the course, class and project. If there are strands which run through these projects alongside a drive for engagement and individual problem-response it is firstly the fluidity and hybridity enabled with a rethinking of the academic book away from traditional codex-like manifestations, and secondly the ability for individuals and small groups to affect change without the creation of expensive platforms or institutional reform.

1. Rethinking the reading list: lecture notes

This first intervention responds to a trend towards digital reading platforms that presents challenges in ownership of text and workspace for the university student, who must adopt numerous new reading tools embedded within particular academic publishing repositories. A return to printed core materials is considered, not for romantic or nostalgic reasons around the physicality of the book, but for practical possibilities when combined with hypertext lecture notes offering a hybridised experience.

Post-digital publishing is a field of study which, while not quite brand new, is still in its infancy and thus teaching a class on this subject poses some challenges to the traditional reading lists in that many key texts are to be encountered online. Those texts that are found in physical books are, due to new alterations in the way libraries operate, often scanned and made available to students as online versions. What follows is not a complaint of this shift but a reflection on how it is that we might navigate the shift in a way that demonstrates to students the need for text ownership.

We often speak to students about how they read, and we help them develop strategies for reading with different intentions, but this tends to centre around the printed word, or even, in more abstract

terms, 'the text'. It is less common but just as important that we speak about reading of digital works (texts that in some areas still face a reluctance to accept the form as a reflection on hierarchies of knowledge production). It has been noted by George Landow (1994), Katherine Hayles (2002), and numerous other scholars that the digital text is quite clearly *not* a *version* of the analogue text, and that even when a text is scanned from a physical book, and thus not produced with a clear intent of digitality, it nevertheless operates in a space of hypertextuality (via an algorithmic book-window). So it would make sense that we deal with these texts in different ways. For the post-digital publishing class that ran in 2016, this would be in the post-digital hybridisation of the reading list that would exist as a single book and a series of posters.

The physical book created during this class in many ways resembles school- or even class-produced 'readers' of previous academic generations. It took the most pertinent digital texts and represented them in book form. So far, so ordinary, but this simple transition from fluid to fixed provides new spaces for reading processes with the understanding that, as each student received their personalised hand-bound reading, they were to make it their own. Margins were created where previously they did not exist, bookmarks and markers were made possible in a form which would emphasise considered choice of placement with an inherent understanding of the finite characteristics of book and bookmark. The printed page was embedded with some authority, 'containing wisdom' (Brigitte Frasse in Wirth, 1995: 143-4) in a way which the digital text lacks and, through personalisation, allowed a material but more importantly mental ownership – these books became objects to which the students 'hold sway' over meaning (Beaudrillard, 2005: 91). The works included were not butted up against one another but were given space for reflection and also for the introduction of questions and additional references in their printing and manipulation by students' own pens. The book acted as a conceptual and theoretical guide for the class as well as required reading, notebook and sketchbook.

On its own, however, this ignores many of the wonderful attributes of digital text – the rabbit warrens of hypertext that allow for non-linear exploration, and the firing of synapses in creation of bridges between seemingly disparate concepts and works. Ideally this needed to be recaptured and accentuated – this occurred through what came to be lecture note posters. Lecture notes in this class serve an odd purpose as slides and audio are available for download, thus they essentially reconstitute core material without offering much to the student other than record. I was keen for lecture notes to be hypertextual in nature, to encourage wide thought and present items or events which only through consideration of lecture material and accompanying reading could be linked. This is why a pair of socks ended up on one poster! The posters are printed and edited ahead of the lecture but are also available (and open) online as visual and linked works which will, through exploration take students to more than 100 different locations, only some of which are introduced in class.

Notes

The first iteration of this class saw books bound with a coptic stitch. They had hard covers and were printed in colour. In conversation with students it emerged that there were some initial (though subsequently overcome) reservations about the notion of 'making the book one's own'. The book made was *too* nice, resembled too much a precious artifact, which we are led to think of as something that should be kept clean, and safe. This year the books look more like manuscripts – bound with staples, not thread, and covered by a strip of binders' tape. They are black and white with colour only on the soft covers – they will get damaged the first time they are put in a bag (something that will be the first task on the first day), and once these corners are a little dishevelled, or there is a crease on the cover, we can make them truly our own!

2. The University library and student engagement

This project initially presents the photobook as an academic book and subsequently deals with how it is that we might support discussion of works that are not constructed in the same way as traditional texts that many students are familiar with and have already become accustomed to speaking about. This plays out against a backdrop of global fascination with the photobook

(Johnston, 2016a), a lack of engagement with library resources from photography students, and an increasing demand for more workspace in the library, leading to ever more hidden books.

The photobook, a medium that unites form and content in a coherent and intentional publication (Aperture, 2015) typically authored by the photographer is, for a photography student, an essential academic book. In fact, the photobook can teach a great deal to a great many, just as film is not only of epistemological resonance to film scholars, the photobook is not only of relevance to photographers. It teaches us about how an image sits within a site, a space, a page. It teaches us about how that single image meets with others around it, and how, in this meeting, multiple images form a new meaning — the product of their individual impact and collaborative phenomenology. The photobook speaks to us about flow, rhythm, design, touch, purpose and, as with any other page-based work, the importance of memory. It is for these reasons that this lack of engagement and low borrowing activity was contributing not only to potential reductions in the library collection or an ability to add new titles but also to a disconnect between students' photographic practice and supportive and exploratory research.

It appeared as though, because their academic experience that had thus far offered little connection to such resources, there was a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of students about the photobook. Reading students' critique and reflection on photography confirmed a trend towards speaking of the image – that is, an isolated 'surface' that is separated from the photograph's materiality and accompanying contextual consideration (Edwards, 2004). It would be unfair to ascribe this only to the prevalence of digital viewing spaces, in which images operate as fluid, floating windows which are only seen when they are summoned (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013), but the connection cannot be entirely passed over – it was certainly the case that the majority of discussion of images, or bodies of work, took as a resource the artists' or gallery's website. Such an approach transferred itself to the photobook when they were employed as a research aid – to paraphrase Alex Sweetman, they became mere 'vessels' or containers of photographic works, not works themselves (Sweetman, 1985: 187). This has been a difficult pattern of approach to the photobook to attempt to reshape, but by positioning students at the centre of a global discourse and encouraging a move towards open discussion of experience, some positive outcomes have been achieved. It should be noted that this is by no means a groundbreaking intervention but it is one that has engendered a new relationship between a student body and the academic book, which now thrives with limited staff guidance.

The first reactive activity was to begin a conversation about the locations in which we find images, and how this might impact our understanding of them and how they operate – a contextual understanding. The photobook here was presented as an example of a medium in which we can speak confidently about photography, for we know that the production of the publication has been considered by its authors. This knowledge allows for some authority and clear parameters of consideration from the students in their critiques (elements that are harder to employ with digital encounters which 're-present' images in new, and ephemeral spaces and sequences). These conversations were longitudinal and veered away from an overtly didactic style. Students have much to say about their reluctance to engage with a form (the book), which for some in the visual arts is associated with prior learning experiences that have been negative. The conversations therefore begin before we go to the shelves.

The trip to the library is framed with a clear purpose, but that purpose itself is couched in vague terms: 'bring back an interesting photobook'. It is not important to define 'interesting' in too much detail; this could be the book's title, colour, type of binding, content or other factor. What is stressed is the aim to search without specific goals, or to *search without predefined terms*.¹ As the books are brought back to the classroom we note their transition from dormant to active as they 'explode into life' (Badger, 2004:4) with a new reading. Now we are presented with a fresh challenge. Speaking about the photobook is not an easy task: it requires us to weave together readings of text, image, design, form and narrative. Ultimately we speak of experience – something that even the professional reviewer can stumble over. So we start simply by describing the book object and asking how this sets up our reading experience, we start to describe the design, and once again connect this to how we feel and how, in turn, this helps us understand the work, or the intent of the work. We look at the photographs and forge links to the object and design we have just noted. It is often messy

but prompted by genuine questions² we make progress and each student that follows has more to consider with help from the proceeding discussion – weight, texture, interactivity, cadence, surprise and so on.

Finally, it was important in this reaction to locate these discussions, as well as our excellent collection and the students' experiences, outside the academy walls. The Twitter hashtag #fromthelibrary became our location device, permitting a corralling of various books, thoughts and experiences from the formal 'class' but also allowing for an audience outside the university to engage with these books, and discussions. This choice not only resulted in a considerable input from photobook collectors, designers and publishers whose collective knowledge far exceeded our own (or certainly my own) but also demonstrated to the students the world of the photobook which was previously unknown to them. The photobook world, as it happens, is vast, and vibrant and, much like the library, offers a pool of resources, connections and discussions. The #fromthelibrary sessions started in 2010 and although they no longer exist in the same manner, instead much of what was needed as a reactive measure is now embedded in our curriculum (in which students play a central role). In fact, students now organise their own reading group sessions typically once a term, they bring photobooks from home and some from the library. I am happy to still be invited!

Notes

We still face problems here. The University, presented with the challenges involved in a growing student body and a general downturn in engagement with physical books has shifted much of its collection to space efficient rolling shelves. As the photography course cohort numbers only around 150 and the photographic collection totals over 1,000 works, it was a natural candidate for this move. Unfortunately this drastically alters the way that students are able to arrive at works – the photobook is often encountered through browsing and not searching – we are most often not looking for information but for ways of making meaning in the sequence, ways of strengthening intent via design or material properties. We need now to think about whether the University library is to become an archive or an ongoing, live and *active* collection – if it is the former we will need new interventions.

3. Challenging hierarchies of conversation and celebrating the reader

In this section I will introduce *The Photobook Club* (Johnston, 2016b), which was produced as a reaction to (and specifically against) the restricted conversation around a canon of photobooks. While this site of tension relates quite particularly to the photobook, the response, which emphasises the voice of the reader whilst simultaneously downplaying the celebrity of the maker, scholar or critic, offers a practical solution for thinking about the academic book as a node around which activities and events can be placed – not as a passive and fixed medium.

Perhaps counter-intuitively the photobook – a form which is expensive to make, buy and distribute, not to mention time-consuming – is experiencing something of a golden age (Crager, 2014), which to others seems an unhealthy cult (Bush, 2016). This phenomenon, linked to both post-digital pragmatism and oppositional reaction has led to a landscape in which there is firstly an abundance of new works, and secondly (in relation to the first) an absence of considered discussion around the merits of new works or the hailing of classics. This presents a problem to the student of the photobook – including the formal academic student, as well as the photographer, designer, binder and publisher. Fundamentally the *The Photobook Club* looks to one of the most overlooked agents in the life of the photobook – the reader.

With this, and the aforementioned #fromthelibrary project in mind, *The Photobook Club* was established as an attempt to oppose and move beyond the hierarchical conversations and canonisation that has occurred around the photobook with publications like Martin Parr and Gerry Badger's personal and revisionist photobook history series (2004, 2006, 2014) or Andrew Roth's list of '101 Seminal photobooks' (2001)³. In *The Photobook Club*, I would feature a noted photobook each month, filming it and inviting discussion from as broad a readership as possible. It was successful in

some ways – over the course of two years eleven photobooks were opened up to discussion – some of which are extremely rare.⁴ The online archive of this experiment still gets a large amount of visitor traffic and it undoubtedly gave a platform for a varied readership, but it would be unfair to place it here as a success in all counts. The primary downfall (which led to a far more successful manifestation of the project later on) is something that I should have seen coming – asking for a translation of the experience spoken about with facilitation in #fromthelibrary to a non-facilitated contribution from readers across the globe. Asking for a coherent, cogent, blogged experience of a photobook began to feel much like pushing a square peg into a round hole. With hindsight I have come to understand, or at least conclude, that this was due to what could be termed a call for *codification* of experience. What I was asking people to do was to transform an intimate, personal and often perplexing event – that of reading – into an easily digestible collection of words, something which prominent Fluxus artist Dick Higgins notes also as a failure of criticism and the visual book. The visual book is geared towards a decoding, despite an emphasis on the vagaries of personal experience (Higgins, 1985).

And so a different approach was adopted, one that resembled in many ways the traditional book club that Jenny Hartley provides in her seminal book group review (2002). It was simple, a group of people around a table with a selection of photobooks brought from participants' bookshelves⁵. My position as organiser was to facilitate, not to teach – to allow discussions to form around and within the works brought to events and, much like with the original online discussions, to provide information or questions when needed and encourage everyone's voice. Events were held in classrooms, bars, cafés and galleries with an understanding of the influence each would have on the discussions taking place. While each event is not recorded (so as to not introduce a longevity which could disrupt a relaxed and uninhibited voice), some documentation exists in after-the-fact reports and photographs of the group or books brought along. Via these representations, the format and the philosophy of open discussion, which temporarily at least ignored celebratory tones, reached new readers. Passionate photobook readers in Barcelona, Madrid, Tokyo and New York began conversations about setting up under the *Photobook Club* ethos.

In this vein the project expanded to a point where there are currently 50 Photobook Clubs dotted around the world, located in big cities and small towns from Brazil to Iceland; Kuala Lumpur to Toowoomba. A network of reading groups all informally learning through the photobook, asking questions of the photobook and, in many locations, producing responses in the form of exhibitions, publications, festivals and critiques. While I am acutely aware that the photobook is to be seen as one of the more 'exciting' forms of an academic book, and I am sure by some taxonomies would not be considered one at all, this hybrid approach to learning through the book shows how post-digital hybridisation can offer innovative solutions. *The Photobook Club* pragmatically incorporates digital networks and their organisational and representational power together with generative events (Kelly, 2008), which encourage non-archived expression and experiential consideration, and could offer a blueprint to think about engagement with other academic texts.

Notes

Speaking selfishly about the benefit of this initiative for my own students (though others can of course take advantage of it), it is the possibility once again to situate themselves as a part not only of a large, critical and professionally oriented network, but also a part of a learning resource. As students study abroad or visit new cities on field trips, they often begin a conversation with the local Photobook Club in order to get a sense of the books of the area, the way in which these works are spoken of, and more broadly, the photographic, artistic and cultural landscape of the city or country.

Having suggested that these three 'interventions' would not offer a blueprint of any sorts, it would be remiss not to articulate a number of findings that might provide malleable thought for others in similar situations. Firstly it should be noted that these small projects were not possible without students' willingness. It would have been exhausting and futile to have kept pushing these ideas, exercises and publications with resistance. Students are passionate about reading and understanding how texts work, something we should keep in mind when faced with possible cuts to reading resources. Also, it is clear (at least from my own experiences and conversations

with colleagues) that for the very large majority, students are not excited (as we may be) by new reading platforms and digital texts. This is not to suggest that they have romantic visions of the book, but instead seem pragmatic in their approach to reading in different spaces and through different media. Finally, as a suggestion for action I am keen to repeat that the reflections presented here stem from modest interventions which take little time and less institutional support. Working simply, with available tools and skills is paramount, not investment in proprietary systems or large-scale university projects (at least not to begin with). With only a laser jet printer and sewing machine or long arm stapler we can start an underground academic publishing house. Basic *dreamweaver* tutorials and a list of further reading is the genesis of hypertextual resources. Mobilising 150 students to take out their maximum quota of books on a given day and display them in a new space is a challenge to the archiving of the academic book. With action and purpose the academic book in all its guises is *alive* and *mobile*.

Notes

1. I have in subsequent sessions asked students to find a book with 'a red spine measuring more than 15cm in height' before ignoring this book and 'selecting the book to its right, the one below it, and its counterpart on the opposing shelf'. Furthering the serendipity of the library and accentuating the significance of encountering works which challenge as opposed to support our works or hypothesis.
2. It is a great help that these works have been selected from a large collection and by somewhat random means — the books brought back to the classroom were often not familiar to me, and were not considered well known at all resulting in support for these genuine inquiries.
3. Essentially, this was positioned so as to make acceptable, and make worthwhile, the photobook equivalent of saying in the field of film studies 'I don't think *Citizen Kane* is a good film', or, 'what makes *Battleship Potemkin* such a significant work?'
4. Together with its author, Ken Schles, I published a digital resource of one of these rare books: *Invisible City* (Schles, 1988). The resource attempted to challenge what a digital *version* of a photobook might look like and act like and so took more cues from the bonus discs of a DVD than it did an e-photobook (Johnston and Schles, 2012).
5. As I continue to revisit this project, I am baffled by my inability to learn from the difficulties my own students had, and what I had seen myself – it was perhaps the frenzy of the photobook community that gave some false hope to this approach.

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