REVIEWS

Martin Parr & Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History volume 1*

(London: Phaidon, 2004)

By Craig McNab

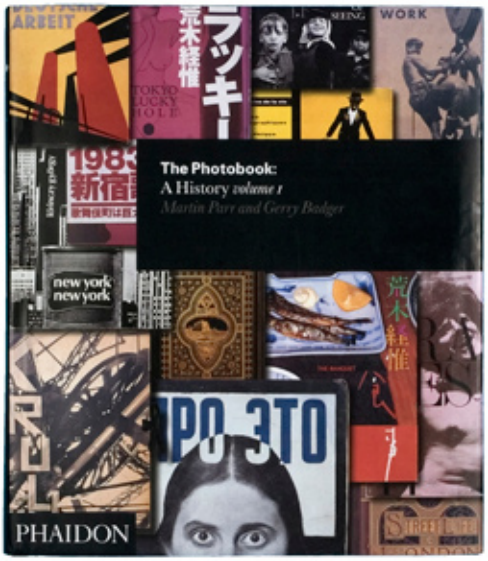

Image of the cover: *The Photobook: A History volume 1* by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger. (London: Phaidon, 2004, courtesy of the publisher.)

"Anybody doesn't like these pitchers don't like potry, see? Anybody don't like potry go home see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses." (Jack Kerouac, 1959.)

These words Jack Kerouac wrote for the introduction of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959) could just as well apply to Martin Parr and Gerry Badger's extraordinary publication *The Photobook: A History volume 1*. This work is the first of a two part study nominally about the vital and enduring photographic form of its title, but gesturing beyond to offer a fresh approach and alternative conceptual positioning of the medium. The authors have put together one of the most engaging photography histories yet written and volume one, reviewed here, in effect traces the prehistory, rise and resolution of modernist photography.[1] In the preface Parr evokes the impact of discovering Frank's *The Americans* as a student:

"An inspiring teacher, it opened my eyes to the true potential of photography; it [...] alerted me to the way in which a well-made book can bring a group of photographs to life. The combination of remarkable images and good design in a book that is beautiful to open and pleasurable to leaf through is an ideal way of conveying a photographer's ideas and statements." (p.4)

In utilising the paradigm of this exemplary work of photographic modernity to inform their own history, Parr and Badger produced a classic photobook themselves. The layout and reproduction standards are exceptional. After starting a chapter with an introductory outline, each selection (from the over two hundred photobooks included) is given a succinct written passage detailing its context, attributes and significance. Alongside these brief critiques are images of the books as

three-dimensional objects showing the cover and a number of page spreads. The text is always informative with a deft touch carefully balancing the scholarly and matter-of-fact to make an easy but spirited read. For instance, the commentary on Diane Arbus's eponymous monograph is typical as it captures the work's essential qualities without distortion and avoids the judgemental reading of most critics:

"...it is a brilliant exposé of American life [...] as cogent and penetrating as that of either Walker Evans or Robert Frank [...] Her vision was much more complex than many have acknowledged, perhaps perverse but never perverted – a beautiful, sad, moving testament to the human condition, brilliantly edited and sequenced." (p.258)

Bibliographical details, actual sizes and printing notes round out each entry. Due to the illustrative methods used the physicality of each book is clear and (notwithstanding the smallish images) rather surprisingly dispels any frustration at not seeing the complete thing.

This first volume is divided into nine chapters and only loosely follows a traditional historiographic model of photography drawing from the medium's three formative impulses – science (epistemology), politics (ethics) and art (aesthetics) – to present its subject as a linear narrative of progress. That the faintest trace of this model is applied to the work as a whole and within each group of chapters can be seen in their titles: "Topography and Travel, The First Photobooks; Facing Facts, The Nineteenth-Century Photobook as Record; Photography As Art, The Pictorial Photobook; Photo Eye, The Modernist Photobook; A Day in the Life, The Documentary Photobook in the 1930s; Medium and Message, The Photobook as Propaganda; Memory and Reconstruction, The Postwar European Photobook; The Indecisive Moment, The 'Stream-of-Consciousness' Photobook; Provocative Materials for Thought, The Postwar Japanese Photobook." (p.3) However, as much (or as little) as Parr and Badger may use this conservative account of photographic history, their work structurally resists it by focusing on the self-contained sequence of photographs in the photobook rather than the single iconic image. In most undertakings the latter is typically used as a sort of unitary building block for other ontological regimes, semiotically and then formally, its meaning being abstracted from its placement. For example – semiotically, the single photograph is the sign of the referent, say evidence of this event or that object; and formally, a particular application of the medium, say a wedding photograph or artistic landscape. That is, we are always made primarily aware of its referentiality to the real or to its type, (as Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida*: "the referent adheres").[2] And further, from this perspective we tend to loose sight of the photographer's presence, as though the image somehow came into existence by its own accord to function illustratively in the context in which it is seen. The sequential image in the photobook tends to resist this. To be sure there are still varying degrees of referentiality but the primary stimulus of meaning is the relationship between the images, whether in small clusters or over the book as a whole. Taken singly out of context these photographs are mute. Again Barthes ("The Photographic Message"): "Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code [...]" [3] – that is, the coding of human intervention. But leafing through the pages of a photobook the photographer's intentions become apparent, the book is dynamic. In fact photobooks signal a phenomenological engagement with the work presented, for both their audience

Double page spread (pp. 298-99) from *The Photobook: A History volume 1*. Daido Moriyama, *Sashin yo Sayonara* (*Bye Bye Photography*), 1972. (Image courtesy of Phaidon.)

and producer. The reader 'uses' the book as an actual physical object and through this use gains an understanding of its meaning. And on the other hand, the artist creates this meaning through the play of the various structural elements they introduce to be used.[4] From the spreads provided by Parr and Badger we can see these works are never restricted to the sort of narrative drive that would make the form a type of frozen cinema. Rather, the artists involved in the construction of these photobooks are typically looking to create a new discursive language to explicate the slippage within the medium of photography and to the real. And in the numerous examples presented they do this successfully.

The final chapter, "Provocative Materials for Thought", on the Japanese photobook (the highlight of Parr and Badger's work), offers a good example of this process. The authors point out that Japan has a rich tradition of publishing photobooks over single prints, and quote from Koji Taki and Takuma Nakahira writing in the manifesto of the radical 1960s photo group Provoke:

"'Photographic images [...] often unexpectedly provoke language and ideas. Thus the photographic language can transcend itself and become an idea, resulting in a new language and in new meanings'." (p. 270)

While this notion is an underlying theme of *The Photobook: A History* it can also explain how recent Japanese work was able to resolve some of the issues of modernist photography and answer the excesses of early postmodernist work, notably at a point the two movements collide – Walter Benjamin's conception of "aura" in relationship to the medium. Countering the drive of modernist

photography's desire for validation as an art-form producing singular works having auratic value, the early postmodernists investigated appropriation as being fundamental to the condition of photography and thereby problematised any idea of an image's aura.[5] A photographer such as Nobuyoshi Araki typically side-steps the whole issue and by playing it both ways reduces the question to apparent posturing. To date Araki has produced over three hundred individual photobooks. His earliest work, *Zerokkusu Shashincho* (Xeroxed Photo Album), 1970, is a series of twenty-five books of eighty copies each made up of images that are actually photocopies done on the office machine:

"Repetitive, fragile, and now extremely valuable, the books [...] at once look backwards to the origins of the photobook and forwards to the digital age, when every photographer with a personal computer has the capacity to produce photobooks at home." (p. 294)

In producing this work that is both throw-away and exclusive the binary is neatly undermined. Araki is typical of the Japanese photographers we see throughout this final chapter who absorb the work of earlier practitioners and through a deconstructive process reissue it in radically new form.

Arguably the genius of *The Photobook: A History* is that it acts as a sampler or compendium for the reader to trace such influences, appropriations and reformulations from one artist's work to another. As these are all shown graphically through the book's outstanding design one becomes aware that although there have certainly been moments of rupture (which fit with a linear model of visual history - pictorialism to modernism; early objective modernism to post-war subjective modernism; modernism to postmodernism; post-modernism to the contemporary situation), photography exists on a synchronic plane in a rhizomic structure and ultimately as a practice is non-hierarchical.

1 *The Photobook: A History volume 2* is scheduled for release in June, 2006.

2 Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. (Trans. Richard Howard. London: Flamingo, 1984), 6.

3 Barthes, Roland. "The Photographic Message.", 1961. In *Image Music Text*. (Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Flamingo, 1984), 17.

4 An example from Robert Frank's *The Americans*: When Jack Kerouac ends his introduction playfully requesting the telephone number of the young women pictured in *Elevator, Miami Beach*, he makes an address that apparently misunderstands her image's point (although its does suggest the resolve of the referent to adhere). Frank sequenced from some 20,000 negatives and so every choice finally made has relevant meaning in relation to the others rather than directly to the real (which the *complete* work engages with). Considering this particular photograph brings to mind employment, money, poverty, boredom, pretty girls (of course), voyeurism, class, power, to name just a few of the (political) connotations that play throughout this seminal work. Without even starting a formalist enquiry of the image one could run the photograph through many more connotative frames.

5 The paradox of the medium is that both are right and both are wrong. As an example of the play of these issues between both schools see (two single iconic photographs) – Walker Evans' *Sharecropper's Family, Hale County, Alabama, 1936* and Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans*, 1981.

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