

## The Perils and Pleasures of Making Lists

*A review of The Book of 101 Books. Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century. Edited by Andrew Roth. Published by PPP Editions in association with Roth Horowitz LLC, New York, 2001*

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As soon as the invention of photography was announced in 1839 the future of the new medium would be intrinsically linked with the production of illustrated books.

On learning the secrets of the daguerreotype process in August of that year, a 32 year-old Parisian optician, Noel Marie Lerebours, immediately equipped and commissioned a team of travelers to photograph the main sights of the Middle East and Europe. Out of 1,200 views returned to him, Lerebours published 110 in a series, Excursions Daguerriennes, within a couple of years. Unfortunately, the daguerreotype was an opaque, one-off metallic plate with an image surface as “delicate as a butterfly’s wing,” which meant that aquatints had to be traced from the original (with the occasional small figure added by hand to provide “staffage”) destroying the image in the process. But the desire to reproduce and distribute photographic images in book form is evident in this early enthusiastic response.

A more practical process for the production of images as book illustrations was the invention of an Englishman, W.H. Fox Talbot. His technique, published in the same year, produced a paper negative from which an unlimited number of identical paper prints could be produced. This was far more practical for book production. Hoping to capitalize on this fact, and thereby assert the supremacy of his calotype process over the French daguerreotype, Talbot set up a print production factory where he began to print thousands of photographs specifically as illustrations for his The Pencil of Nature, issued in parts beginning in 1844.

Until the advent of reliable photomechanical ink-based reproduction techniques, most nineteenth century photographic books were illustrated with tipped-in prints, a labor-intensive process which limited distribution and kept the costs prohibitively high. After the turn of the century, ink reproductions gave a tremendous boost to the photographic book.

I feel like apologizing for this historical diversion away from the review in hand, but its relevance will, I hope, become apparent and relevant. Perhaps the most important point is this: throughout photographic history, the photographic book has been the preferred and most efficient method by which the works of photographers could be seen and appreciated by the public at large.

Until the 1970s photographic exhibitions were rare and spasmodic, and only a few ever traveled beyond the original venues. Today, galleries and museums displaying photographs are ubiquitous. It cannot be overemphasized that this is a new phenomenon. On my first visit to New York City, in 1968, the only place where photographs could be seen on a reliable basis was the Museum of Modern Art. There was not a single specialist photographic gallery. Throughout the rest of the country and across Europe it was rare indeed if a major museum allowed photographs to sully their sacred precincts.

As an exhibition was essentially out of the question for the vast majority of photographers, the book remained the sole forum for the wide distribution of images by even the most acclaimed image-makers. The history of photography could be plausibly written from these books alone. Even here, however, a word of caution is necessary. The photographic book might have been the only reliable means for a photographer to reach an audience but that audience was still pitifully small. Therefore even a photographic book by a respected name was notoriously difficult to find a publishing home. A few decades ago it was possible to buy every photographic book in print, even on a meager budget, and wait months for the next one to appear. The upside of this fact is that, by and large, the field was self-editing. Only the most famous and respected photographers tended to find a publisher willing to invest a great deal of money for a fickle and tiny market.

Today, the problem is the opposite. So many photographic books are published in a misguided attempt to cash in on a burgeoning market that discrimination and merit take back seats to hype and mediocrity. (Few photographic publishers have any background or deep-rooted knowledge about the medium).

Now it is difficult to keep abreast of the new titles and impossible to acquire other than a small sample of photographic books in print. The book collector, therefore, is confronted with a new problem and must make some tough choices: which ones are likely to stand the test of time; which ones will “catch fire” and rise in value; which ones will be seen retrospectively, as being significant, even seminal, even though initially they seemed to merge with the undistinguished masses?

The Book of 101 Books is a brave attempt to answer these questions by identifying “seminal” photographic books of the twentieth century and by extrapolation identifying recent titles which are collectible. Thirty-five of the titles were published after the 1960s

when both photo-galleries and books began to proliferate. Ironically, with the advent of so many galleries and museums raising the value of original prints, the reproduced image in book form has also seen a meteoric rise in value, especially those titles which are now out of print.

In an admirably lucid and succinct Introduction, Andrew Roth, the driving force behind this volume, states the criteria for his selections. In order to be included, the book had to be a “thoroughly considered production”...”to embody originality and, ultimately be a thing of beauty, a work of art”; the photographer had to have historical significance and monographs by individual artists who had an active role in production took precedence over “books that are merely a place to exhibit images”; and the book should feature images destined to be seen printed in ink and bound between covers.

The standards are clear, even if their application is somewhat muddled by reality. I will give a few examples of my quibbles but first I must declare my own bias. I am not a book dealer or collector. I am primarily interested in the photographers’ images and their role in the medium’s continually evolving history. I am also aware that critical reviews have been given a precise value, by Charles Lamb: “the five-hundred thousandth part of the tithe of a half farthing.” The worth of the following words, therefore, if my sums are correct, is but one forty millionth part of an old English penny.

Less pecuniary, but more pungent, is the response of Max Reger to a music critic: “I am sitting in the smallest room of the house. I have your review in front of me. Soon it will be behind me.” Andrew Roth has generously invited my criticism by prefacing his Introduction with a quotation from another list-maker, Anthony Burgess, writing in 99 novels: The Best in English Since 1939: “If you disagree violently with some of my choices I shall be pleased. We arrive at values only through dialectic.”

Mr. Roth, you are about to be pleased because it is in the nature of lists to invite challenge, whether the list is “The Five Greatest Presidents,” “The Ten Sexiest Women in Hollywood,” or a list of 101 seminal photographic books of the twentieth century.

A detailed discussion of which individual books should have been included or excluded would be tedious to write and to read, and merely reflect a personal preference. So I would like to make a few general points based on Andrew Roth’s own stated criteria for his selections.

The first criterion was that the book had to embody originality in design and be a thing of beauty, a work of art. The problem here is that this standard is impossible to sustain, for a simple reason. Until very recently the market for photographic books was so small that few publishers have been willing or able to invest a great deal of creativity and high production values for such a limited audience, unless the name of the photographer was deemed important enough as a guarantee of adequate sales. Moments Preserved by Irving Penn would be a good example. Many of the books in ...101 Books are actually

run-of-the-mill productions which have been invested with “art” status only much later, when the photographer had received greater acclaim, and the title was long out of print. This is true of Tulsa by Larry Clark, Diane Arbus, Wisconsin Death Trip by Michael Lesy, Suburbia by Bill Owens, and a host of other examples.

If this criterion of originality, beauty and art was strictly applied there would not be 101 photographic books in the twentieth century which would meet it. Again ironically, The Book of 101 Books displays higher production values - print quality, design, originality - than most of the books included in its contents.

The second criterion - invoking the active role of the photographer in the book’s production - is also impossible to define. What constitutes “active?” Photographers are active in that they generate the images to be published. They may even suggest sequencing and indicate preferences for some images over others if editing is necessary, and they would, of course, cherish but not necessarily expect consultation in the layout and design stages. But that is no more an active role than that hoped for by any author in any field. Most photographers are not active participants in the whole process of production. Probably rightly. The disciplines of editing, design, typography and production are skilled areas in which the photographer might, but generally does not, excel. An instructive example might be The Americans by Robert Frank, rightly included in ...101 Books because it is, by general acclaim of the medium, a seminal body of work. The images are masterfully sequenced and arranged, but the field still debates the comparative roles of Frank and his brilliant picture editor, Robert Delpire, in the book’s compilation, with the consensus of opinion giving greater credit to Delpire. This type of collaboration between photographer and picture editor is historically common and eminently sensible.

Contrary to popular myth, the photographer is often not the best editor of his/her own work. Eugene Smith, represented in ...101 Books by his Minimata, was a great photographer but an incompetent editor. All his best work occurred when control was wrested from him, with much kicking and screaming, and the editors at Life were given a free hand to lay out his picture essays without the photographer’s interference.

The fact of the matter is that most photographers need collaborators in the production of their books. It is not an asset, or an automatic sign of excellence, as Roth implies, that the individual photographer played a central or decisive role in presentation and printing. Photographers who can edit, understand layout, typography, sizing, print processes and the myriad other elements of good book design are very few and far between. One of these few is Ralph Gibson who is not only a highly respected and prolific photographer but also a book publisher, of his own work and that of others, through his Lustrum Press. Yet another irony is that although Gibson published Tulsa, which made the list, not one of his own books was included, not even The Somnambulist, published two years earlier and, arguably, a far more “seminal” book than Clark’s.

On the same issue of collaboration, my own recommendation to a book collector attempting to sort the wheat from the chaff in the crowded field of photographic publishing would be to take the advice of a highly respected photographer or critic, not a gallery director. Photographers tend to recognize each other and the merit in work, even when it is very different from their own, in ways that curators do not.

The third criterion for inclusion in ...101 Books was that monographs by individual artists took precedence over “books that are merely a place to exhibit images” and that the book should feature images “destined to be seen printed in ink and between covers.”

Like the previous criteria this one is also impossible to apply or even assess. The world of photography does not work in this way. Until recently practically all photographers did indeed view a book of their own work as the ultimate goal, for a very good reason: there were no alternatives! So few galleries and museums would consider displaying photographs and the sale of original prints was so meager that the book became the presentation of choice by default.

Until academia provided an alternative in teaching, most photographers in the history of the medium were working professionals, primarily for illustrated magazines. This fact is clearly reflected in the names featured in ...101 Books: August Sander, Erich Salomon, Brassai, Bill Brandt, Andre Kertesz, Weegee, Robert Capa, William Klein, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, et al. Occasionally, a photographer could glean a selection of their best images and find a publisher for them, as did Henri Cartier-Bresson for the truly seminal The Decisive Moment. In the earlier decades of the twentieth century I doubt if more than a handful of photographers began a project with a book in mind as the sole outlet for the work, saying to themselves “This is destined to be a book.” They shot their pictures and then hoped that one day they could find an outlet for the best of them, whether magazine spread, exhibition or book. But perhaps I misunderstand. Perhaps Andrew Roth is talking more metaphysically, in the sense that Fate, A Higher Power, or some other Force of Destiny conspires to select which work becomes enshrined in book form. If so, I can merely confess that these forces have not given me any insight into how they operate as editors.

In recent decades, with the proliferation of galleries and museums, a burgeoning collectors market and tenured positions at centers of higher learning, the photographer does have alternatives. But even when the goal is an exhibition, a book is seen as an important permanent record of an otherwise transitory event. Ideally the exhibition is accompanied by a monograph which serves as the show’s catalogue and acts as an independent and longer-lasting separate entity, the former boosting the sales of the latter. This symbiotic relationship between exhibition/publication is now the ideal for most photographers. The point is that the criterion - exclude books that are merely a place to exhibit images - is unworkable. By and large, photographic books, then and

now, are exhibitions between covers. Look at the spreads of sample pages in ...101 Books. So many follow the same style: one image (occasionally a group) per page surrounded by white space, with the text limited to a brief Introduction, like a museum wall label. What is this, with minor variations, if not an exhibition between covers? This style of layout is so ubiquitous that it may indeed be the most appropriate form for the majority of photographic books precisely because it clearly resembles an exhibition.

The book-as-exhibition is further solidified by the fact that most of the recent photographers included in ...101 Books are well known because they have been promoted by major art galleries and museums and/or receive patronage from university art departments, which have replaced the princes and the church as the prime benefactors of artists. In this rarified art atmosphere, those photographers who remain "outsiders" are less likely to find their names and books in lists like ...101 Books, no matter how respected by the photographic world at large. A few examples would include Philip Jones Griffiths, Charles Harbutt, Burk Uzzle, Joseph Koudelka, Costa Manos and a host of others, all of whom have produced books of power and influence. Even seminal...

And this word does provoke some concern, as it is so prominently displayed in the book's subtitle. The word "seminal" implies that the selected titles were influential on other photographers, in that they contributed the seeds of later development. There is no definitive test of this influence, except to note that not one in a thousand practicing photographers has ever heard of Kikuji Kawada, Ugo Mulas, Pierre Molinier, Lothar Baumgarten or Christian Boltanski, and that no matter how accomplished as artists, I see no signs of influence emanating from many of the others featured in the list of titles. Of course, the editors could, and probably would, retort that photographers should be aware of the above names, and that they have been influenced by many of the others whether they know it or not. Fair enough. The word "seminal" is so complex in its connotations that anything may be asserted in its defense. But the notion that Larry Clark is so seminal that two of his books are included but that far more influential photographers of the same period - such as Les Krims, Jerry Uelsmann and Duane Michals - are not mentioned merely underscores the futility of such categorizations.

And while on the subject of seminal, let it be said that the most (categorically so!) seminal books in twentieth century photography were excluded by the monograph-criterion in that they were anthologies, the most obvious examples being The Family of Man, The Photographer's Eye, and New Topographics, a show curated by William Jenkins at the George Eastman House, the catalogue of which instigated a worldwide theory/style of picture-making and introduced a new term into the history of photography. You can rarely get any more seminal than that.

Given the American penchant for nationalistic fervor in both war and peace, it is still unsettling to see such overt bias in any context. ...101 Books is no exception. Of the 48 titles included since 1960, 39 are by Americans. (Four are by Japanese, who have

had a special relationship with American museums in recent decades for some inexplicable reason; two are by Frenchmen; one by a Spaniard, one by a German couple, and not a single one by a British photographer, such as Don McCullin, Philip Jones Griffiths, Martin Parr, Chris Killip or any other one of world-class photographers who have produced exceptional photographic books).

Of course, the only criterion should be merit, not some misguided effort to be politically correct in terms of nationality. But it is hard to believe, given the arbitrariness of the stated criteria, that so many Americans were validated to the exclusion of so many foreign publications...but then the art world of galleries and academia have always practiced incest.

I wish the book had been subtitled: Important monographs by American photographers in the twentieth century, and then my irritation would dissipate.

With so many doubts and disagreements, I may have given the impression that I lack respect for the book. Not at all. This hefty, handsome volume has a great deal to offer. It is the nature of any personal list that its contents invite challenge, which Andrew Roth generously acknowledges. I have used the book, and Roth's stated criteria for selection, in order to raise issues for discussion, not to denigrate the result. As a rare book dealer, Roth has an understandable agenda: by asserting which books are collectible and most valuable they *ipso facto* become more valuable. Nevertheless, the identification of these books, with useful data on publication history, the illuminating commentaries and the reproductions of typical spreads all add up to a very worthwhile enterprise which will be a valuable source of reference not only for book dealers but also for critics, historians and anyone interested in the close relationship between book and photographer.

i would hope for further volumes in the works, which could allow room for anthologies, exhibition catalogues, portfolios and self-published books - and a more thorough survey of foreign titles.

Meanwhile, The Book of 101 Books is a valiant effort which has set the standard for similar surveys in the future.

