

Doing it by the Book

Despite the emergence of digital platforms such as the iPad, the photobook is enjoying unparalleled attention. Colin Pantall meets the new generation of indie publishers behind the boom.

"There are three main reasons for the upsurge in new photography books," says Marlon Schuler, the German bookseller whose Cologne shop many rate as the world's finest. "The first is Martin Parr and Gerry Badger's two-volume *The Photobook: A History*, which has made the role of the photobook much better known and important. The second reason is that people have realised the value of the medium of the photobook itself. A book can work better than an exhibition; it's a firm unto itself where the photographer, publisher and designer all work together. And the last reason is due to technical developments that mean that you can now make small editions of 500 or 700 copies, which wasn't possible before, and you can easily distribute and sell your own work online."

Bruno Cocheil, who runs *Self Publish, Be Happy* - a blog, photobook library and occasional pop-up shop - and who used to work for British

publishing house Chêne Noir, agrees. "It's easier to publish because it's cheaper to print, and we've also become more sophisticated regarding design," he says. "Photobook culture has become broader, too - there are dedicated book fairs, and more people buy photobooks than 20 years ago."

"But at the same time, a lot of people who are making books are doing something else to pay the rent," he continues - and he should know. He recently published his first book, the compilation *Self Publish, Be Naughty*, and is currently working on a book for Algeria, but his day job is as a writer and academic. "There used to be this idea - which isn't true - that Martin Parr bought every photobook that was published. I just came back from Offprint and there were just hundreds and hundreds of books. You simply can't buy them all."

Offprint took place last November at the same time as Paris Photo, and Cocheil was

there with a Self Publish, Be Happy stall. One of the major European fairs for small photobook publishers, Offprint was a place where the full gamut of publications (and the new publishers who make them) could be seen, touched and felt. "There was this sense led to it," says Dosh Gowin, who runs *The Red Press* from Kansas City, USA. "It was a bit of everything, the full spectrum of small publishing - people making their own books, slick gallery publishers, from magazine, a German distribution company called Motte, and Schuler."

DIY

Gowin started *The Red* to publish his own books, something he has in common with David Schwimer of *Hassle Books* and many others. "Before I started *Hassle*, I had been working within magazine publishing," says Schwimer. "After seeing some books put out by small

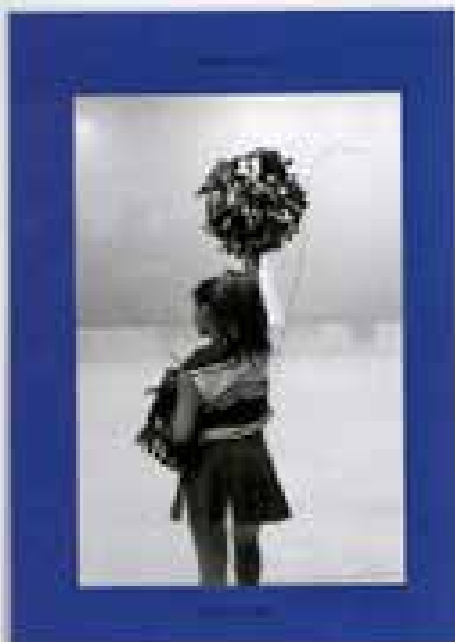
publishers I realised that my interests were more in book publishing, specifically creative artists' book-type publications. I began with a small book of my own work, six pages including the cover, and that started working with other artists."

Emma Freese of *The Velvet Coll* started publishing to highlight specific classes or genres, especially city life and the urban environment. "I have always been inspired and captivated by photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, who looked above street level and was obsessed with the form of the city rather than the action at street level," he says. "When I moved to London [from Ireland] in 2006, I spent a lot of time with my camera trying to make sense of my new surroundings. East London, in particular, is a post-industrial area where whole communities are re-evaluating their identities in the wake of de-industrialisation. I found this fascinating, and a most interesting subject for my photographic

practice and for this publishing house."

Je Sais une Bonne de Jour (2005), on the other hand, has its roots in fashion culture. "I started out with real 'cray' and sometimes my own pictures," says co-founder Aurélien Joliet, who set up the organisation with a collective of designers and editors based in Paris and New York. "The idea was to give a space to young photographers to show their work and publish limited-edition books. We want to be somewhere between books and art where we sell one book at a time. It is not a mass market and we love it, we have the feeling we know a lot of our buyers."

Few photographers published by these indie start-ups are well known, but some big names are also entering the fray. London-based Miles



Books has published work by Terry Richardson, Boris Mikhailov and Corinne Day, for example, while Dodec recently published Peter Hugo's *Vision of A Gossamer*. In Hugo's case, it was personal contacts that made the high-end collaboration possible. "Peter is a friend that I met when he was starting his career," says Dodec's Damien Poulain, a French art director now living in London. "I've designed most of his books, so when he was looking into publishing his new book, I proposed he do it with Dodec."

Some big names have also got involved in publishing, most notably Magnum photographer Alex Soto, who began Little Brown Mushrooms (LBM) for the sheer creative joy of it. "It started with *The Last Days of W (R)* in 2008," he says. "I didn't want a big book so I decided to self-publish it as a newspaper. It was a goof, and I ended up having a lot of fun with it. LBM is a lemonade stand and, with each project, I want to keep that

in mind. If it gets too serious, if it becomes a business or a job, then I want to back off. My goal is not to get too serious – to break even, not to grow, not to make money."

Hard Copy

The creative impulse is also central to Delphine Bedel, who has developed a new Master's course at Geneva's Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design, which takes creatives through the process of making a book. "I realised there was a strong sense of new art publishing that involved performance, photography, documentary, collage and writing," she says. "So I wanted to develop a course that would give artists the chance to work in the chain of making and publishing a book from conception, from editorial decision, making to design and distribution."

"The course is called *Hard Copy*. We meet monthly – the rest we do online. We make the

books over a year, but it's more like an editorial board where the focus is on production, on making things," she explains. "Each participant works with an emerging designer. We work as a group, in teams and as individuals, so there are different levels of participation. Each book has a budget of 2000 Swiss francs, and we make editions of between 200 and 500. We find bookshops around Europe to sell the publications in – some I found, some contacted me, and then we go to shows such as *Offprint* in Paris, *Miss Read* in Berlin and the *Amsterdam Art Fair* in May next year, which I am organising."

Maya Buchat's book, *Ma Titre à Copier*, is a *Hard Copy* book. Printed on recycled paper, it has a similar feel to the publications put out by *Prevoise* in Japan in the 1960s, the ritographed

2 *A Project de Dix* by Erika Henning, 1960's issue of *Dix*.



images dissolving into the pages, a loss of visual and personal identity made with vivid printing and design. *Romain Legros' Arpico* (7) is printed on newspaper to mirror the vernacular level usage of banners in the South of France, while *Dorothea Baumgart's Pleasure Annual Dominance* (8) is a series of colour posters of archival photographs used to test emotional responses under laboratory conditions.

Print runs

Ma Titre à Copier (1) was printed at London's Ditto Press, a small printing company that has worked with the fashion, design, music and entertainment industries. Dime's Ben Freeman believes that the current economic climate has had a major effect on publishing and printing, and that the closure of larger publishers, printers and paper producers has been accompanied by a rise in small publishers and printers. "In the

publishing industry, people depend on good lines of credit," he says. "So when the credit crunch happened, there was a domino effect. If a magazine went bust and declared itself bankrupt, it wouldn't pay the next print run down the line. That's the printer, so the printer went bust. They can't pay the paper company so the paper company goes bust."

This chain of bankruptcy in Western economies has hit the large printers, he says, as well as supporting businesses such as the paper industry. "What's happening in mainstream publishing is that if you are printing a large number of copies, you outsource to China. For 50,000 copies it would be half the price in the UK. But the quality suffers massively because you need to be there to see it done. In the UK you can easily be on press and if you are publishing a book, you need to be on press."

Unable to compete on scale, Ditto focuses



on alternative printing methods. "We do risographing – it's not a new thing but setup costs are cheaper than offset, and it's more organic than digital," says Freeman. "Digital printing is cold and soulless; risographing is a kind of mechanical screen printing that uses a thermal stencil and different spot colours, not just CMYK. You never know what you're going to get and you can pick the colours you print with. So if you want something that is fluorescent pink, you can have it."

Small printers such as Ditto also offer a more personal service than most large printers, meeting both the print and philosophical needs of many photographers. "Things are getting engraved onto the paper for ever," says Poulain. "So following the process from start to finish is

3 *Pleasure Annual Dominance* by Dorothea Baumgart, published by *Hard Copy*.



very important. Things can go so wrong if you are not on press. This is the last place where you can make slight changes on the colour and tones as paper reacts to printing differently."

"I like to be there and work there when the books are made," says Geschel, whose *Self Publish, Be Naughty* (3) was printed by Ubu. "They do an amazing amount of work for you. *Self Publish, Be Naughty* is essentially a series of posters put together with an elastic band and each page is different. It was great to watch it being made. There were all these middle-aged women giggling as they put together these semi-porno images by hand."

With many mainstream photobook publishers asking for contributions to printing costs now, publishing in China is still a cheap and viable alternative for those publishing a more traditional offset book – and the quality can be as good as the best printers in Europe if you do your

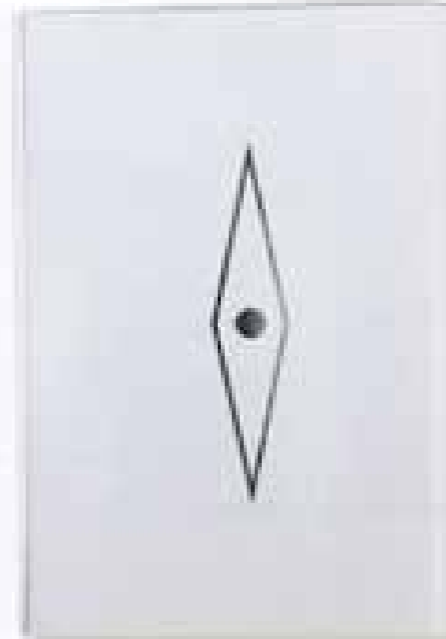
research and oversee production. "I've printed in the US and in Germany before and the quality is great," says Goswin. "It's the cost that is high. In China, quality control is often not so good because they don't care, they want to do it quick, so I went on press for *Of Pulling and Floating*. I was glad to be there because I could get it printed how I wanted it. I went to China, they came back to Kansas, and all of a sudden this big box arrived in California and they were putting 30000s of books on a lorry, and I had three pallets of books arrive at the studio. That's when you say, 'What the hell have I done?'"

Most of the indie publishers make editions much smaller than a thousand – White Press printed 250 copies of Doug Rickard's *A New American Picture*, for example, digitally and on-demand. "We printed in sets of 25, but there were so many orders that every time we printed, they were sold out already," says Helge Schlaghecks,

White Press' publisher and designer. "Because it was print-on-demand, we output digitally on recycled paper, and that suited the digital sense of the project, which was based on Google Street View images [WP writes]."

Thanks to some great word of mouth – Schales, who acts as editor and "inspector" for White Press, was showing early prototypes to collectors and curators months ahead of its publication, and Rickard runs the influential website *American Suburb X* – the book sold out quickly and almost distributed itself online, part of the new model of selling books. But for booksellers, the new ways of selling can be as much a threat as an opportunity. "I've been selling books for 25 years, and from a bookseller's perspective this is the most difficult time," says

4 *J Months In Another Place* by David Essex, published by Press Books.



Schales. "On the one hand we're oppressed by Amazon and the discount situation. They sell the hard and butter books cheaper than I can buy them wholesale. On the other hand we also live out on the independent books because they distribute themselves. They don't need me to sell so we end up in the middle with a bunch of storage books but not enough to survive."

The future?

"In 10 years' time, book publishing will just be for connoisseurs," says Dittó's Freeman. "Places such as Waterstones will be history. But arts publishing will still be alive because you can't look at art books on a Kindle. Art-book publishing is a realm unto itself. The market size is not changing, it's not growing, but the way people are producing books is changing."

"I think perhaps I'm a little old school," says Claudia Pfeifer of Page Books (4). "I don't buy

music at iTunes – I go to my local record dealer, listen to new records and have the artwork in my hands, and when I buy it I know I support the artist, the label and the record store. With books it's the same. I won't look at a 'zine on an iPad so I can go back to surfing blogs. That's not the point. Also the printed picture is superior in all respects to the image on a screen. A photograph is something physical. It has a materiality. You want to touch it, have it, collect it, put it on your wall or your shelf. You need to have a hard copy."

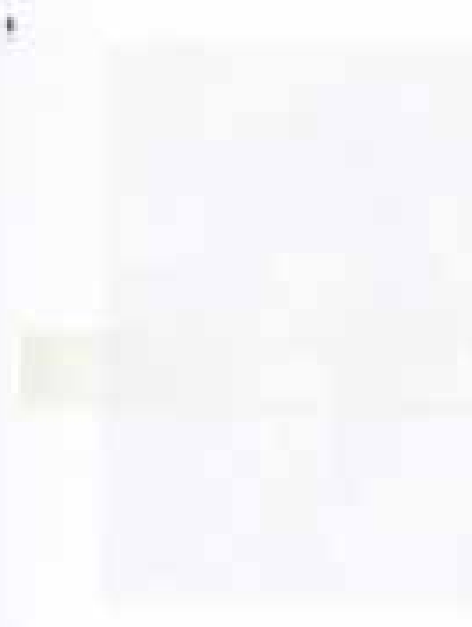
This emphasis on photobooks' tactile nature presents small publishers with a dilemma – where to sell their work. With many high-street bookshops closing down, often the only place to buy these books is online, or at big city art shops or book fairs. Many people are unable to touch and see photobooks in the flesh before they buy them, and with books of questionable quality jostling alongside the great, it means the

novelty is wearing off fast. For Martin Parr, this is to be expected though, because if there are more indie photobooks than ever, "there are also more bad photobooks than ever."

"It's still the ambition of photographers to get published," he adds. "As a collector, it's more fun because if you see something you like you have to get in there fast or it will sell out. There's more variety – it's getting better and more interesting. The only downside of this is there's more rubbish, but you need the bad photobooks to highlight the good ones."

For Parr, the best photobooks are from the Netherlands, because of the country's great tradition of bookmaking, design and photography. "Bookmaking is part of the curriculum in colleges," he points out. "For an art degree you have to make a book."

5 *Self Publish, Be Naughty*, published by Ubu.



Design elements

As Parr's comments suggest, design is an essential element in a good photobook, but it's often influenced by pragmatic considerations of cost, availability and skill. "We printed our two first Blue 'zines in a place that didn't have many options for papers for covers," says Arbet of [SB]. "We thought blue was the best choice to match with a black-and-white photograph on the cover, and black-and-white print on the inside. All the Blue 'zines are made the same way: blue cover, black-and-white, laser print, 48 pages, soft cover, 15-cms. All these elements are pretty humble, as there is no reason to sell the 'zines at an expensive price [they are priced €15 and put out in runs as small as 50 copies]."

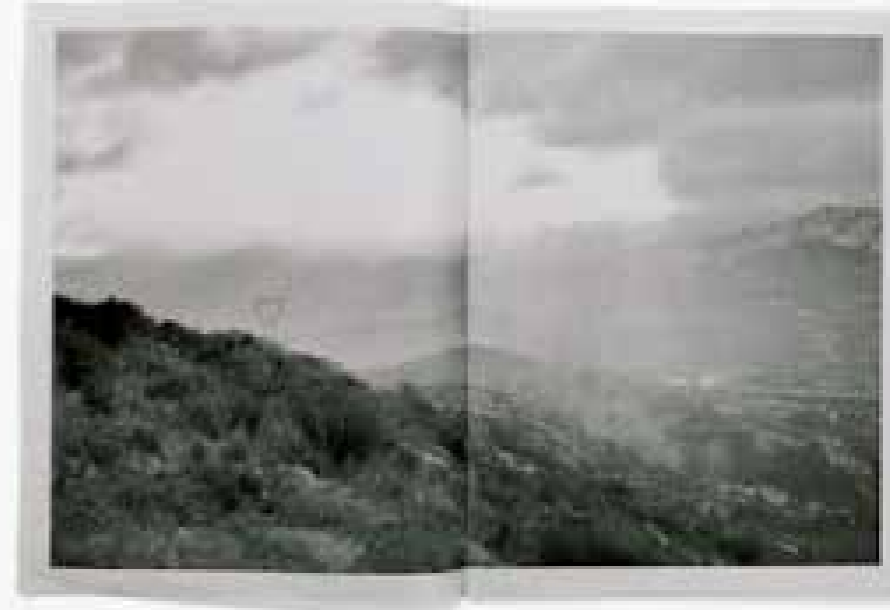
On the other hand, many indie publishers are taking advantage of their freedom to produce more complex designs. People are happy to mix different papers with different printing

techniques and bindings; there are newspaper books, folder books, and the binding can be loose, spiral bound, stapled or sewn. Gatefolds and keyholes are becoming more common, and even pop-up books are making an appearance. It's exciting but it has its downsides, as Sorli found out the hard way. "My designer, Hans Serge, works with a printer in Wisconsin and he gets them to do amazing things," he says. "But sometimes we have to do things ourselves. For the *Conductors of the Moving World* book, we typed the pictures in ourselves [you can see a video of the making of it at www.bit.ly/LBM-CotMW]. Each book had 17 pictures taken from a selection of 90 and the edit was supposed to be random, but it's actually very difficult to be totally random, so we had a system for putting pictures in. We started and after 30 minutes I had dinked three pictures and bent the pages, and I hadn't even finished one book. We had 900 books

to do and I was going into meltdowns, but one of the interns had the slipping-in-down post. We called him Johnny Longfingers, and he saved us. An edition of 900 doesn't sound much but when you have to do that yourself, it's plenty."

Other independent publishers are investigating iPad apps, exploring the possibilities and working out how to make them. Spanish-based Atem publishes photobooks and runs a popular magazine called *Carpenteria*, for example, but it has also launched its first iPad book. "We didn't know how to do it but we decided to publish an iPad book a year ago," says Emma Llerena. "We felt that the screens were perfect to display photography and art in general. It's a great device for artists. We also thought that we could 'play' and make an interactive book that

4 The Last Days of W by Alan Cork, published by Little Brown. www.littlebrown.com



would go beyond the regular printed book.

"We didn't have a specific budget, but our aim was to make it possible at the lowest cost. There are two things in this world to invest: time and money. We didn't have money, so we had to invest time. The budget for making this first app was 100 to pay Apple to be in its developers' program."

It's an exciting time but while iPad books look certain to be part of the future, beyond that no one seems certain what will happen. "What comes next?" asks Schaden. "It will be interesting because the pot is not getting any bigger. Now there are new independent booksellers specialising in regional books across Europe because it's easy to start a business, but, as a bookseller owner, if there are 30 new booksellers and I lose one percent of sales to each one... You can work out the loss of business."

Schaden believes photographers and bibliophiles will have to reach out to a new

audience to make the economics work, expanding visual culture and the number of people interested in it. "Even in newspapers, there are no reviews of photobooks," he says. "There's cookery, children's books, novels, history, economics but no photobooks. Each book has to have an interesting and sustaining subject - something like *Paloma AJAra* by Ricardo Cases, which we published with [UK-based] Dewi Lewis, is a fascinating book [BPP 10000 and 10000], but it's interesting for everybody, not just photographers."

"If photobook publishing is just a circle where different photographers copy each other's work, it's no good," he concludes. "Too many young photographers are in a ghetto where they focus on style not content, and all buy books from each other. We need to go beyond that."

7 *Arpetia* by Roman Legros, published by Hand Copy

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