

DES COWLEY

Photobooks and the State Library Victoria collection

While the term ‘photobook’ is a relatively recent one, coined in the 21st century, it has come to stand for a category of books that has been around since the birth of photography, in the 1840s. When Anna Atkins first pressed her botanic specimens onto light-sensitive paper and published the results as *Photographs of British Algae: cyanotype impressions*, in 1843, and when William Henry Fox Talbot published *The Pencil of Nature*, in 1844, it is arguable they were creating the earliest photobooks.¹

Prior to the development of photomechanical processes, it was not uncommon for 19th-century books to be illustrated with mounted, or tipped-in, photographs. State Library Victoria’s earliest publication to contain a photograph is the June 1846 issue of *The Art-Union* journal, which includes a salted paper print by Talbot advertising his newly patented Talbotype process.² Robert Holden’s bibliography *Photography in Colonial Australia: the mechanical eye and the illustrated book* (1988), for instance, details 130 publications issued in Australia before 1900 illustrated with original photographs.³ However, it would be meaningless to consider all such books as relevant to the contemporary definition of the term ‘photobook’.

Andrew Roth’s *The Book of 101 Books: seminal photographic books of the twentieth century* (2001) was one of the earliest attempts to develop a historical canon for photobooks.⁴ His work has been largely overshadowed by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger’s monumental three-volume *The Photobook: a history* (2004–14).⁵ Publishers have been quick to respond to a growing interest in



Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1865 (from life), in Margaret Julia Cameron and HHH Cameron, *Alfred Lord Tennyson and His Friends*, London: T Fisher Unwin, 1893, photograph by Margaret Julia Cameron, Rare Books Collection, RARESEF 928.21 T25C

photobooks with publications such as *The Latin American Photobook* (2011), *The Dutch Photobook: a thematic selection from 1945 onwards* (2012), *The Chinese Photobook: from the 1900s to the present* (2015) and *The Soviet Photobook 1920–1941* (2015).⁶ At the same time, auction houses Christie’s and Sotheby’s began testing the market with high-profile sales devoted to photobooks.⁷ These sales have seen prices for key works, such as Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959) and Henri Cartier-Bresson’s *The Decisive Moment* (1952), soar.⁸ The 2017 acquisition by Tate in London of Martin Parr’s collection of over 12,000 photobooks signalled major institutional commitment to building dedicated collections of photobooks, an indicator they were now looked upon as products of contemporary art practice.

If a photobook is something more than a book that happens to contain photographic images, what then makes a photobook? For Parr and Badger,

a photobook is a book – with or without text – where the work’s primary message is carried by photographs. It is a book authored by a photographer or by someone editing or sequencing the work of a photographer, or even

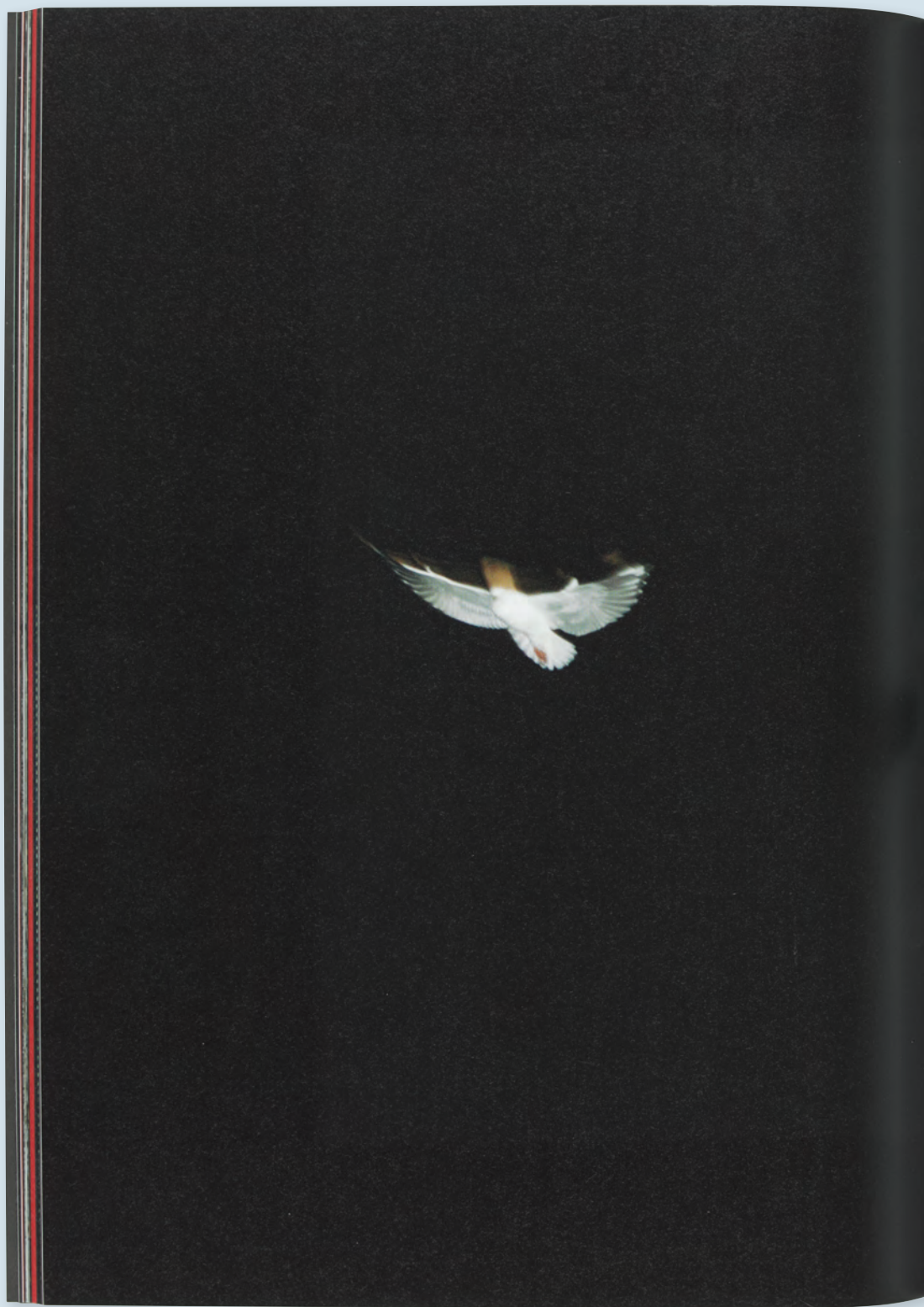


Peter Lyssiotis, *Journey of a Wise Electron*, Melbourne: Champion Books, 1981, Rare Books Collection, RARELT 702.81 L98J

a number of photographers. It has a specific character, distinct from the photographic print.⁹

Alternatively, photography critic Ralph Prins has defined the photobook as an autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film. The photographs lose their own photographic character as things ‘in themselves’ and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.¹⁰

Given that State Library Victoria, or the Melbourne Public Library as it was then known, collected illustrated books from the time it opened, in 1856, it is to be expected that its collection will hold items that today are considered canonic in the history of photobooks. Notable examples include Maxime Du Camp’s *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie* (1852), a book of photographs made during Du Camp’s travels in the Middle East with the novelist Gustave Flaubert; John Thomson’s *Street Life in London* (1877), one of the earliest books to feature social documentary photography; and Margaret Julia Cameron’s





Sarah Walker, *Second Sight*, Melbourne: Perimeter Editions, 2018, Rare Books Collection, RARELTF 702.81 P56WALS

Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends (1893), a series of photogravure portraits Cameron made of the poet and his circle.¹¹

With photography increasingly recognised as a key art form throughout the 20th century, a crossover began to develop between the artists' book and the photobook. Figures such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Man Ray, Ed Ruscha and – in Australia – Peter Lyssiotis are common to both forms. Unfortunately, many international avant-garde publications fell outside State Library Victoria's former collecting policy, and it is only in recent years that attention has been focused on better representing international photobooks produced throughout the 20th century.

Australian photobooks were noticeably absent from Badger and Parr's survey. However, photographer and collector Doug Spowart has recently begun the process of developing a list of canonical publications in his *A Compendium: Australian photobooks* (2017). His preliminary work has mapped the broad terrain, identifying key works from the 1970s through to the 1990s, such as Robin Boyd and Mark Strizic's *Living in Australia* (1970), Carol Jerrems' *A Book about Australian Women* (1974), Peter Lyssiotis' *Journey of a Wise Electron* (1981), Marcia Langton's *After the Tent Embassy* (1983) and William Yang's *Sadness* (1996).¹² In April 2019, a collection of 52 Australian and New Zealand photobooks, assembled by Spowart with assistance from Victoria Cooper, was acquired by Tate to supplement Martin Parr's collection.¹³

The 21st century has witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of photobooks being produced, ushering in a new generation of practitioners who, perhaps for the first time, are self-consciously versed in the history and theory of the form. This has gone hand in hand with the development of inexpensive digital publishing: anyone can now be a publisher.¹⁴ Locally, the development of art book fairs – the annual Melbourne Art Book Fair, for example, began in 2015 – has encouraged independent and self-publishers of photobooks, as has the inauguration in 2011 of the Australia & New Zealand Photobook Award and the establishment in 2013 of the Asia-Pacific Photobook Archive, in Melbourne.

The contemporary photobook continues to evolve and is increasingly the product of collaborations between publishers, photographers and designers. Publishers such as Steidl Verlag in Germany and Mack in London, and Perimeter Editions, M.33 and Bloom Publishing in Australia, are committed to producing books that wed the photographic image with innovative design and packaging.

State Library Victoria has worked closely with Perimeter Books, a bookshop located in the Melbourne suburb of Thornbury specialising in photobooks



Yask Desai, *Craigieburn, It's Not the Same*, Melbourne: [Yask Desai], 2018, Rare Books Collection, RARELTF 702.81 P56DESC

and independent art publications, to ensure that recent publications are acquired and represented in its collection. Examples include Sarah Walker's *Second Sight* (2018), winner of the Australia & New Zealand Photobook Award in 2018; Yask Desai's *Craigieburn, It's Not the Same* (2018), a series of portraits of people the Australian-Indian filmmaker and photographer met on the streets of Craigieburn, an outer Melbourne suburb with high unemployment rates; Ying Ang's prize-winning photobook *Gold Coast* (2014), which looks at the darker side of the Queensland region known mostly for its sun, surf and retirees; and Maylei Hunt's *Let's Eat Cake* (2018), which documents the nationwide Australian Marriage Equality movement in Melbourne and Sydney and its ultimate success through the 2017 plebiscite.¹⁵

One of the challenges for collecting institutions, including State Library Victoria, is to develop strategies for building representative collections of local independent art publishing, including photobooks, artists' books, zines and other ephemeral works. Much of this publishing circulates outside formal channels – mainstream publishers, bookshops and library distributors – and is effectively off-radar. In a digital publishing environment, print editions can run to as few as 50 to 100 copies, or even fewer, often selling out within days or weeks of publication. It is therefore incumbent upon these institutions to build networks and relationships with the communities producing such works, benefiting from their knowledge and expertise, to ensure these materials are collected and archived for future researchers.



Surfers Waters Estate



Lance