



## The Role of the Photography Book in Your Career

In their second installment, MARY VIRGINIA SWANSON and Editor, DARIUS HIMES, continue to discuss the many angles of publishing a book of photographs. Pull out your pad and pen. It's time for research!

**IN OUR INTRODUCTION TO THIS SERIES** of articles, begun last issue, we started by asking photographers to initiate a questioning process about how and where a photography book would fit into their overall career. In this installment, we will address that question head on.

As part of the journey to publishing a book, each photographer must begin an inner dialogue revolving around the statement, "I want a book of my photographs." There are three elements to this statement: the *I*, which is the photographer asking the question, the *book* as an object in its own right, and lastly the *photographs* as content, and their marriage to the book form.

Several questions are paramount to this dialogue, and the inquiry needs to begin with you, the photographer, the *I*. "Where am I in my career, now, and where do I want to be in 10 years?" Are you locally, regionally, or nationally known? Do you have gallery representation or are you seeking it? Is your work editorial, photojournalism, portraiture, landscapes, or travel based? Are you a commercial photographer intent on establishing a fine-art career? Are you working for a local newspaper and want to do freelance for bigger publications? Do you have 3 years or 30 years worth of work under your belt?

As you assess where you are in your career, ask yourself what specific purpose you want the book to serve. This question will lead you to consider the type of audience you intend to reach through publishing. Perhaps gallery directors and collectors are your top priority or art directors for national magazines. Maybe it's a regional artists grant board or even the impulse buyer at Borders. A statement to affect social change or simply an object of beauty are also serious goals. It is important to be honest with yourself and to set attainable goals based on your career and desires.

The second major element in the key phrase, "I want a book of my photographs," involves considering the *book* itself. What comes to mind when you hear the word book? Is it a phone book, a text book, Plato's *Dialogues* or a

Detail from *SERF, Manhattan*, 2001, published in *Autograf* by Peter Sutherland, powerHouse Books, 2004 (top). Detail from *Salerno, 1933*, published in *Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art*, Bulfinch, 1996. Detail from *Fort Tilden*, *Queens, New York*, by Gus Powell, published in *Paper Placements*, by J&L Books, 2004.

Harlequin romance? Is it James Nachtwey's *Inferno* or George Rodger's *Village of the Nuba*? This is where your research phase begins. Pull out a pen and paper and jot down a few of your favorite books, regardless of whether they are photography based or not. For each title, list the page count and number of illustrations, describe the binding, cover material, and the endpages. What type of paper is used? What fonts? What is the final trim size? Are the illustrations four-color or duotone? If neither, then what? All of these are details that relate to books as objects; being versed in the vocabulary will ultimately serve you well when it comes to your own book project.

The history of the photography book is as old as the medium, and while we're not suggesting that you become historians of the field, we do suggest that you spend some serious time looking at the designs and combinations of image and text from the previous century of book publishing. There are several places to begin your study. *The Book of 101 Books*, edited by Andrew Roth, showcases seminal photography books of the 20th century. Facsimile reproductions of the cover and interior spreads accompany succinct and insightful reviews of each volume. Another volume with excellent facsimile reproductions of the original books is *Fotografia Pubblica*. Published in 1999, this volume is international in its scope and covers the years 1919-1939 during which fine-art offset printing became prevalent. For more contemporary artists' books, *Artist/Author* is an indispensable resource to the explosion of radical book forms that began in the

Dummies work best; they give us an idea of what you are thinking about, and give us insight into whether you are realistic or insane, not that either state really counts. We've done more books by the latter than the former.—Daniel Power

1960s and continues today.

Throughout this phase, you will undoubtedly come across books that excite you or leave you cold. Be aware of all of your responses and consider the role the photographs play within the book form carefully. If you really love a book, ask yourself why. Is it the photography or the idea behind the images that moves you? Do the proportions of the book feel good in your hands or is it the feel of the paper? If you don't like a book, ask yourself why not. Look at layouts and image placement, proportions and outer dimensions, the amount of text compared to amount of images. All of these questions must tie in

with your overall goals and the audience you are trying to reach.

## SURVEY THE FIELD OF PUBLISHERS

As the last task in your initial research, you should survey the field of publishers. Learn who is publishing what. Publishers tend to have bodies of work just as photographers do and are often interested in certain types of work. In this installment, we will introduce three publishers. We have asked each publisher to describe their vision, audience, the volume of books they publish, future projects, and submission guidelines. Here's what they have to say:

### **Michael Sand, Photography Editor for Bulfinch.**

**Vision:** Bulfinch specializes in heavily visual books of all kinds and has a long history of publishing some of the finest books of photography, including books by Irving Penn, Herb Ritts, Sally Mann, and many others. We are a boutique imprint within a large commercial publisher—the Time Warner Book Group—and my interest is in finding and publishing photographic books that have both integrity and wide appeal. At the end of the day, we hope to publish books that will make an impact and that will be around for a long time.

**Audience:** It varies from title to title. With photography books, we can generally count on a base of about 3,000 copies being sold. The challenge is to break out of the dedicated photography book-collector's market and to reach other audiences. We do this with aggressive publicity and by publishing books that have breakout potential. We also work to have the book sold in independent bookstores, museum stores, online, and other non-chain outlets.

**Quantity:** We publish 12-15 photography books a year. The print runs range from 6,000 copies to 60,000 copies, depending on the book.

**Acquiring Titles:** Some of the books we publish come from working directly with photographers; others from agents, galleries, museums, and book packagers. We see many, many unsolicited book proposals, and while these rarely lead to publishing deals, there are occasional exceptions. What's most important is that a coherent proposal accompany the images: an idea of the marketplace, why the book would stand out and who its audience might be. Return postage and packaging are always a good idea too.

**Future Projects:** This Fall we have a terrific photography list. To mention just a few highlights: *The Great LIFE Photographers* is a 608-page doorstop of a book that features portfolios of work by the 100 staff photographers who worked for LIFE. It's a mix of some

of the most iconic images of the 20th century and dozens of surprising gems from the LIFE archives. We're also publishing *XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits*, by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, a collection of double-portraits (one clothed and one nude) of many of the top porn stars of the past decade, accompanied by witty and insightful essays by an unbelievable line-up of writers, from Gore Vidal to Salman Rushdie, Nancy Friday to John Malkovich. We have a long-awaited collection of the work that Abelardo Morell is perhaps best known for—*Camera Obscura*—which I'm very excited about [see review this issue]. A new book by Irving Penn, called *A Notebook at Random*, is Penn's personal selection of favorite photographs, drawings, and work in graphic media spanning his entire career. And in early 2005 we have *John Szarkowski: Photographs*, an eye-opening collection of his photographic work, which accompanies a major exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco and then MoMA, New York.

#### **Jason Fulford, Co-founder of J&L Books**

**Vision:** Leanne and I are publishing work that we find original and inspiring. We are especially drawn to work that has a nice mix of sentiment and abstraction - also humor and beauty. As a non-profit organization, we're not concerned with the marketability of the work.

**Audience:** Ideally we'd like to mix up audiences with the diversity of what we're publishing. Someone will respond to one title and then notice another J&L title they might not have gone to right away. Each title is different, but they're all family. It's very hard to predict who will pick up which book and like it—and we're not really concerned with that. We trust that each title will eventually find its own audience. We don't spend any money advertising our books. Articles have been written by magazines who have approached us, but we don't have a marketing plan to speak of.

**Quantity:** In 2003, we published 6 photography books. This year we're publishing a mix of photography, drawing, fiction and painting. 2,000 copies is a typical print run.

**Acquiring Titles:** We accept submissions in any form—one image or an entire book dummy—jpegs, cd, dvd, paper copies. One thing we ask is that we not be sent original artwork in the mail. Our review process is very slow, and we don't return submissions.

**Future Projects:** We're working on a book about Los Angeles with the artist/photographer Ed Panar. Mike Slack is putting together his second book of Polaroid pictures. Morwyn Brebner has written a beautiful novella that we're publishing with some found photography. We're also collecting short films (7 minutes and under) from various filmmakers for a DVD.

To contact J&L Books: [mail@jandlbooks.com](mailto:mail@jandlbooks.com)

#### **Daniel Power, Founder of powerHouse Books**

**Vision:** The idea of publishing that we have is to embrace all interesting interpretations or representations of visual culture, past and present. We try to find a way to make these book projects happen, even if the commercial audience is limited, or the nature of the project demands extraordinary physical attributes and edi-

torial ingredients. We want to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts, to make the project in book form an experience for the reader and collector.

**Audience:** Our audience is a shifting one. We seek out the unusual, we challenge assumptions, and try to envision what best enhances the subject matter. A book is always more than paper and ink between two boards. Our audience ranges from kids interested in graffiti art to fans of Helen Levitt's masterworks, from sneakerologists interested in the minutiae of sneaker culture in the 80s to society types who love seeing who's who in Patrick McMullan's photographs. Life is wide and varying, and illustrated book subject matter—and a House to shelter them all—should be no different.

**Quantity:** We publish about 4-8 books in the Spring, and 15-25 books in the Fall. Runs will range from 2500 (sometimes as small as 500 for special, limited projects) to upwards of 30,000. New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers was unusual: we started with 100,000 and went on to print another 110,000 copies for the U.S. alone.

**Acquiring Titles:** Most new projects come by word-of-mouth recommendations from people we have worked with or from agents and other photo world individuals. We do take submissions, but we've published about half a percent of what has been submitted; the best thing you can do is build up your CV before thinking 'book.' You, the photographer, are as much if not more important to the commercial viability of the project than the subject matter. To get into bookstores, buyers have to be told why the book is important, and since subject matter can be similar or has been done in the past, the author of the subject matter becomes *the* distinguishing element. Dummies work best; they give us an idea of what you are thinking about, and give us insight into whether you are realistic or insane, not that either state really counts. We've done more books by the latter than the former.

**Future Projects:** We are working with the photo collector Ray Merritt on a survey of the child in photography; an upcoming book by Vogue editor-at-large André Leon Talley on his visual inspiration; a book by Jonathan Moller, whom I met at a photo festival, on repression, refuge, and healing in Guatemala (*Our Culture is Our Resistance*); a fantastic rediscovery of the work of Mark Cohen (*Grim Street*, with interviews by Joel-Peter Witkin, Anne Wilkes Tucker, and Thomas Southall), a book by The Beastie Boys (*Sounds of Science*, with two CDs), and a reissue of *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan* by Danny Lyon, with new images and a fantastic text by Danny about this stage of his life (then and now).

To contact powerHouse Books: [info@powerHouseBooks.com](mailto:info@powerHouseBooks.com)

We've now, hopefully, given you some ideas about how to approach your nascent publishing project. It's up to you to begin the dialogue, refine your goals, and do your research! In the next installment, we will survey the field of publishers more broadly, hearing from several more publishing about their vision and approach to photography books.