THE HISTORY OF THE PHOTOBOOK
VOLUME I

Alex Sweetman reviews the new survey by British photographer and collector extraordinnaire Martin Parr and photo-historian Gerry Badger.

THE PHOTOBOOK: A HISTORY, Volume I, by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, is the most important contribution to the field since modern histories of photography began to appear in the early twentieth century. We can be sure that this book, and its forthcoming second volume, will lead the way to a revitalization of thinking and publishing in the field. It dwarfs previous publications in both its scope and the information it provides. This book will become the cornerstone of research and scholarship in the field for the twenty first century.

The book is divided into two volumes of nine sections each. The first two sections of Volume I, "Topography and Travel: The First Photobooks," and "Facing Facts: The Nineteenth-Century Photobook as Record," extend and deepen the discussion of nineteenth century books begun in the landmark Grollier Club survey, The Truthful Lens, 1980. This was the first book to deal with photobooks of that era. The third section, "Photography as Art: The Pictorial Photobook," addresses aesthetic concerns spanning almost the entire history of the medium and is guaranteed to raise eyebrows. The remaining six sections divide the modern era into familiar categories, but include some very unfamiliar books in the areas of modernism, documentary, propaganda, and postwar (WWII) publishing. The final chapter on the postwar Japanese photobook is long overdue.

The Photobook: A History is a close collaboration between Martin Parr, the photographer and obsessive collector of photobooks, and the well known photography critic, Gerry Badger. Together they selected the books, but each agreed to include some books the other would not, a process which improved the scope of the work. From the beginning, it was meant to be a history. The working title was "a history of photography through the photographic book," which explains the lengthy discussion on the nineteenth century as well as the need for two volumes. Approximately four hundred and fifty photobooks will illustrate the two volumes, and this could easily be expanded to one thousand or more at the risk of becoming an encyclopedia. Instead, we have a critical survey and a wealth of judicious opinion that addresses and expands the canon, globalizes and transforms it.

Not all of the obvious photobooks have been included. In fact, many books by American modernists have been ruled out, because their work does not rise to the authors' standards for inclusion. The authors' sense of the photobook is that it should be more than a collection of pictures. The text, quoting John Gossage, states that the photo-
book should be a great collection of pictures and "it should make that work function as a concise world within the book itself. And finally, it should deal with content that sustains an ongoing interest." In the opinion of the authors, Stieglitz, Weston, Adams, and others, do not rise to this level. These omissions are offset by the vast, international scope of the project, which brings many new titles to light for the first time. This alone is worth the price of admission.

Parr’s inspiration for the project was Frank’s, The Americans. For Badger, it was Evan’s American Photographs. These two books are tough, critically engaged projects which elevated the role of the author in the work. The standard is high and the achievement is impressive.

The Photobook: a History is divided into overarching periods in world culture which reveal the zeitgeist, what Badger refers to as the "subject" and "period tendency." The various responses of the photographers to their lives and times both reflect and create a distinct period style described and, more importantly, illustrated in the different chapters.

The illustrations themselves are a feast. However, this feast points up a much larger and very troubling famine. And that is the utter failure of our major cultural institutions to adequately address the phenomenon, and to collect these works and make them available.

Photographic education currently addresses only a handful of books. The same failure is reflected in our national library system, which does not systematically collect contemporary photography books. One can only hope that many individuals will form significant personal collections of photobooks and leave them to their preferred institutions for the sake of posterity.

Unlike many histories which keep a safe distance from the turmoil of the present until it can be sorted out by consensus formed over time, this one is fully engaged with the present and will conclude with a critical view of contemporary photobook publishing, as well as a final epilogue: "The Ultimate Photobook."

The broad scope of this ambitious project will do much to stimulate our ongoing discussions of the photobook, past, present, and future. And there will be much to quibble about; much fact-checking, disputation, and many PhD dissertations.

A word to the wise, if photobooks are important, then this history of the photobook is very important.

The Photobook: A History. Volume 1. By Martin Parr and Gerry Badger. 320 pp., 850 color and black-and-white illustrations, 10 x 11 1/2. Cat# PI146H $75.00 Published by Phaidon, London.