

Swiss Photobooks from 1927 to the Present – a Different History of Photography

In the history of photography the photobook plays a major role not only in publicising and disseminating photographs, but also as an independent means of expression. The significance of many photographers' works only emerges when presented in book form, in the coherent sequence or series of images. Content, design and printing quality combine to produce an intricate architectural whole.

This jubilee exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of the Fotostiftung Schweiz focuses on a selection of photobooks that have influenced photography in Switzerland since the late 1920s. At that time, technical advances made the reproduction of top quality photographic images possible and promptly gave rise to a first boom in illustrated books that placed greater emphasis on the photographs than on the texts. Since then, Swiss photobooks have continued to develop in various directions and have repeatedly attracted considerable attention at international level as well.

With the help of seven thematic areas – homeland, portraiture, mountain photography, the world of work, aerial photography, contemporary history, travel – this exhibition aims at a kind of typology of the Swiss photobook which draws attention to the potential interplay between book and photograph, while also revealing the extent to which modes of expression have altered over the course of time. Concise excerpts from these books exhibited on the walls highlight the basic principle of each photobook – a photograph positioned on a double page still remains an integral part of a larger sequence. The concept, design and reception of photobooks are examined more closely in display cases. A large wall installation is devoted to photobook covers. The photobook is also presented as an object in film form: “reading” illustrated photography books is not just an intellectual but also a sensual act.

The Publication

The exhibition by the Swiss Foundation for Photography is based on an extensive research project in which hundreds, in part long-forgotten photobooks were brought together and critically examined. The selection of works resulting from this process forms the backbone of this new history of Swiss photography, which is also being published as a book. The publication presents the individual works with extensive picture spreads and texts by 23 authors – a chronological reference work that also traces the process that has seen the photograph change from a document into a means of subjective and artistic expression.

Swiss Photobooks from 1927 to the present – A Different History of Photography, ed. by Peter Pfrunder / Fotostiftung Schweiz. Lars Müller Publishers, Baden. 640 pages, 700 illustrations (German, with English and French translations), CHF 98.-

Credits

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Photobibliothek.ch – a Private Collection

For a long time the photobook was considered mainly as a medium that reproduced and documented – thus subordinate, compared to the so-called “original”. However, a re-evaluation has been taking place in recent years: photobooks are attracting the attention of photography historians, institutions and collectors as independently conceived artworks. A separate market has emerged where photobooks are sought and traded as original photography.

Since it was founded in 1971, the Fotostiftung Schweiz had devoted a lot of attention to the photobook. Today it has a unique and comprehensive collection of primarily Swiss photobooks which is incorporated into the library of the Zentrum für Fotografie (see www.fotobibliothek.ch).

Several exquisite private collections also testify to the burgeoning interest in the medium of the photobook, one of the most outstanding of which, in Switzerland, is the photobibliothek.ch, compiled by Hans Rudolf Gabathuler in Diessenofen TG. The primary objective of this private library is to present the overall history of photography in original documents. At the www.photobibliothek.ch website you can access everything from the first books to the camera obscura via important documents on the invention of photography and including outstanding 20th century photobooks.

The Swiss photobooks presented on our “Bücherwand” (Book Wall) originate from the photobibliothek.ch. Here, for once, the main focus are the covers and dust jackets – the “faces” of the photobooks, which are often crucial for their artistic and/or commercial success. The installation highlights not so much their photo-historical significance, as their visual attractiveness, their creative combination of aesthetic and economic necessities. The significance of the “covers” extends far beyond the mere statement of the contents. Image, title and typography adhere to specific rules and signal, for example, affiliation to a genre. Cover and dust jacket also stand for the “personality”, the character and aspiration of a photobook – they are assertion, promise and temptation all in one.

The scientific bibliography for the “Bücherwand” is available as a PDF at www.photobibliothek.ch.

Homeland

Numerous Swiss photobooks deal – directly or indirectly – with the issue of national identity, be it that they depict the country in all its geographical and topographical diversity, be it that they explore everyday life and the peculiarities of its inhabitants from an almost ethnographical viewpoint.

The illustrated volumes published as of the mid-1920s were primarily of a touristic nature: based on the souvenir albums of 19th century travellers, they contained large excellently-printed works that paid homage to the beauties of the country, and spirited viewers away on a virtual journey. Titles such as *Tausend und ein Schweizerbild* (1926) or *Gaberells Schweizer Bilder* (1927 / 1930) alluded to the older tradition of landscape painting and, in their leaning towards the picturesque, simply edited out the disruptive aspects of modern civilization.

As of 1970 a series of critical “homeland books” began to appear that contrasted greatly with these. A young generation of photographers attempted to subvert the clichés of an ideal world, still valid in the 1950s and 60s, and expose the contradictions and problems of an affluent society. They focussed mainly on people, not on landscapes; photographers such as Alberto Venzago or Michael von Graffenried often adopted a sardonic approach, casting an ironic eye on their country.

Finally, important contributions on the issue of identity are being made by those more recent photobooks that attempt to document real life in Switzerland from an unbiased, coolly documentary perspective. Whether these feature a man-made and transformed terrain (as in Nicolas Faure’s *Switzerland On the Rocks*, 1992, and Christian Schwager’s *Falsche Chalets*, 2004) or the rituals of everyday life (as in Andri Pol’s *Grüezi*, 2006), the respective approaches are based on precise exploratory fieldwork. These photobooks point unobtrusively to phenomena intended to reveal the “true” state of the country without being anecdotal.

In the Mountains

One motif that permeates the history of the Swiss photobook is the Alpine landscape – from its first modern presentation around 1927 to the present. What initially instigated such illustrated books, that compile and identify views of spectacular summits, was an almost scientific curiosity and a delight in discovery – parallel to the growing significance of Alpinism. These books were later joined by examples that celebrated the Alpine world and testified to the beauty of pristine nature. Albert Steiner's *Schnee, Winter, Sonne* (1930) is prototypical of this kind of nature worship. It may well be dedicated to the Engadine region, but its confrontation of the tiniest snow crystal with sublime mountain peaks makes an eternally valid statement.

The mountains became a symbol of Swiss resistance in the context of what was known as Spiritual National Defence and the Cold War. Books like Ernst A. Heiniger's *Viertausender* (1942) and compilations such as *Wo Berge sich erheben* (1955) recalled, with a certain pathos, the extent to which the Swiss were characterised by their Alpine habitat and its traditions.

The works that have endeavoured to engage impartially with the Alpine world since the 1990s have taken a mainly artistic approach – from Balthasar Burkhard to Cécile Wick, from Guido Baselgia to Reto Camenisch and Barbara Heé. Their respective books often deal with man's encounter with the totally other, with a nature that remains alien, mysterious and unfathomable. Ample scope is given to the irrational in these photobooks, and leafing through them demands a kind of meditative immersion. Books such as these that are related to the mountains also have parallels in other artistic approaches to nature which concentrate on the elementary and whose strict use of black-and-white images results in a kind of photographic poetry. The most recent example of this is the book *Swarm* (2011) by Lukas Felzmann, a study of the movement of flocks of birds.

Aerial Photography

Aviation and photography: these two technical achievements combined had already produced totally new kinds of images in the 19th century. Because man's perspective had been restricted to the horizontal for thousands of years, his sudden release from that fixed, earth-bound standpoint gave rise to a blissful feeling which, as soon as it was technically feasible, he also tried to communicate to a wider public in what were basically picture books.

Two pioneers are worthy of mention for the first phase in the history of the Swiss photobook: the air balloonist Eduard Spelterini (1852-1931) and the pilot Walter Mittelholzer (1894-1937). Whereas Spelterini, still very much in the tradition of the 19th century, took a romantic view of the landscape and eulogized the sublime sight of the Alps in his book *Über den Wolken* (1928), Mittelholzer's aerial views were already for the purposes of analysing settlement structures and topographical connections, as in his book *Die Schweiz aus der Vogelschau* (1924). Many of his other publications indicate that he advocated a modern approach, he championing the aerial view as a particular quality of photography, in keeping with the "New Vision" of the 1920s. Le Corbusier went even further in his book *Aircraft* (1935). Aerial photography motivated him to indict the "terrifying, overwhelming spectacle" of a haphazard housing sprawl all over the earth.

From 1975 onwards, aerial photography reached a new dimension with large-format illustrated books like those published by Georg Gerster. The greater flying altitude, the technical improvement of the camera and the potential of colour photography enabled photographers to portray the earth in what were sometimes almost abstract images. Gerster became the forerunner of an aesthetic that condensed natural phenomena and devastating excesses of civilization into an "anonymous land art". His photobooks not only convey scientific insight (useful, for example, for archaeology), they also communicate a feeling for the beauty and uniqueness of our planet.

The way things are

Modern photo reportage is closely linked with the advent of illustrated magazines around 1930. For a long time, however, not much more than a double page was devoted to the photographic reports. Which is why at an early stage several authors published their extensive image and text material in book form, such as, for example, Walter Bosshard, whose *Indien kämpft* (1931) is a large photo-journalistic work on India's struggle for freedom.

As of 1941, under the supervision of Arnold Kübler, the magazine *Du* flourished at the interface, so to speak, between magazine and book. Repeatedly *Du* provided a certain photographer with the opportunity of publishing a comprehensive report in a full special issue. The interplay between image and text aimed at spotlighting the theme from all sides. The first issue of *Du* by a single author was published in May 1946: in it, Werner Bischof reported on a devastated Europe using 57 photographs on 66 pages.

A new form emerged in the late 1960s, the photo-essay, a thematically dense series of images whose full force developed through the juxtaposition of the sequence on the pages of a book. Luc Chessex' *Das Gesicht der Revolution* (1971), a study of depictions of Fidel Castro in Cuba, was as innovative as *A Fortunate Man* by Jean Berger and Jean Mohr (1967) had been, just prior to it. That collaboration between writer and photographer engendered two parallel loosely-linked narrative strands.

With the gradual disappearance of the photo reportage from the print media – it has only survived in niches since the 1990s – documentary photography sought new outlets. Here too, illustrated books played an important role, both offering ample space, and facilitating complex narrative or serial structures. These books are no longer dependent on day-to-day events. This applies, for example, to a long-term project like Manuel Bauer's book on the *Dalai Lama* (2005). New aesthetic approaches are also recognisable in several documentary works published as photobooks and tinkering with, among other things, the ambivalence between authenticity and mise-en-scène.

Artists' Books

Since the 1970s, numerous artists have been turning to the photobook as a form of expression and experimenting with the possibilities this kind of book offers: format, paper, design and printing being just as important as the use of photographs for recording ideas or creating a new reality within the space of the book. By playing with the object-like, sculptural qualities of the book, many artists' books question the stale conventions surrounding the act of reading of images. Leafing through a photobook, scanning its images and handling its corpus prove to be sensual experiences – a journey of discovery that involves hands and fingers as much as the viewer's eyes and imagination. Brief film sequences explore the following books:

Alex Sadkowsky, Titine Mensch,
Candid Lang: *Kofferraum der Welt*, 1971

Hannah Villiger
Neid, 1985

Balthasar Burkhard
„Klick“, *sagte die Kamera*, 1997

Peter Tillessen
Gold, 2000

Annelies Štrba
Frances and the Elves, 2005

Lukas Felzmann
Swarm, 2011

René Mächler
Paesaggi di Donna, 1965

Roman Signer
Bilder aus Super-8 Filmen, 1995

Thomas Flechtner
Snow, 2001

Linus Bill
Tu m'as volé mon vélo, 2008

Luciano Rigolini
What you see, 2008

Laurence Bonvin
Freizeit, 2009

On the Road

Among the first printed books to feature photographs as illustrations were travelogues and descriptions of adventurous expeditions. As of the 1920s, a more efficient printing technique meant that greater weight could be given to the photographs than to the texts. The possibility of exploring the world by car with a camera engendered a new type of photobook. Around 1930, opulent encyclopaedic country monographs were also very successful, for example, the *Orbis Terrarum* series by the Swiss publisher, author and photographer Martin Hürlimann.

These more objective historico-cultural depictions of countries were joined some time later by subjective accounts. Being out and about became a topic in itself, the presentation of facts becoming increasingly subordinate to the thoughts and feelings of the travellers. In this respect Gotthard Schuh's *Inseln der Götter* (1941) set whole new standards.

The photographic travel book really blossomed in the 1950s. People in Switzerland had a strong desire to get away and discover the world, as the country had been so closed in on itself during the war. Whoever could not travel let themselves be transported to other continents by illustrated books – for example, the publications of the Lausanne book club, La Guilde du Livre, the marvellous quality of whose intaglio printing gained them international renown.

But people were not just interested in exotic countries. Numerous photobooks were devoted to the United States – the most famous being Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958/59), the fruits of his travels, by car, throughout the United States over a period of several months. In it Frank not only broke with the tradition of the beautiful image, but also highlighted problems in post-war American society. Frank's inner monologue became the model for generations of photographers committed to the subjective view.

The World of Work

In the early 1930s, company portraits and anniversary publications illustrated with photographs began to take on a whole new significance in the self-image of industrial enterprises, both as a definition of their current status and as a new advertising tool. What is striking about Jakob Tuggener's *MFO* (1935) is that the unconventionally-designed brochure blends his own images of the engineering works with anonymous photographs of the plant to create an integral work that is rounded off with modern typography. By comparison, Hans Finsler's picture section in the book-portrait of the Heberlein company (also 1935) still seems like a classical plant tour, focussing on architectural features, machines and materials. For a long time, this concept of an objectively presented, positively oriented company portrait functioned as a model, until, in the 1960s, René Groebli took it to a whole new level thanks to a very deliberate use of colour, blurring and movement. What all these commissioned works have in common is that they were never on sale in retail shops and therefore have scarcely ever been considered in the history of photography.

Unlike Tuggener's *Fabrik* (1943), for example, a more subjective, artistically shaped work which, in the middle of the Second World War, took a critical view of technical progress; or Paul Senn's *Bauer und Arbeiter* (also 1943), which attempted, in the context of Switzerland's Spiritual Defence, to unite two completely opposed worlds of work. Kurt Blum's expressive *Pictures of a Factory* (1959) ventures once again into the spray of sparks on the factory floor of the Cornigliano steel works near Genoa, while Frank Gygli celebrates the construction of the century, the Grande Dixence dam, in marvellous, serenely aloof general and detailed photographs. With the decline of the corresponding industries, however, workers' sooty faces and noisy engine rooms disappeared, thereby robbing the world of work of some of its more photogenic aspects. It took the sensitivity and tenacity of an artist like Hans Danuser to press on into new sites of "progress", like nuclear power plants, research institutes or laboratories, and reveal them to be the secret powerhouses of the modern world (*In Vivo*, 1989).

People

Books are particularly suitable for the genre of the portrait as they enable comparative viewing: the particular features of one individual shift to the foreground; a single person is integrated into a larger group. Many books of portraits thrive on the series.

Quite a few photobooks focus on the face – be it to outline a typology or to explore the field of tension between the individual and his or her assignment to a collective (social status, origins, profession, social milieu). Very different messages can be conveyed here: *Schweizer Volkstypen* (1940), with photographs by Hermann Stauder, instrumentalises the portrait for the Spiritual Defence of Switzerland; Marianne Müller, by contrast, concentrates more on the person behind the public façade when portraying young employees of the Migros company in unaffected snapshots devoid of cultural or national clichés.

When a person is depicted in full usually the photograph also addresses the theme of the relationship between the person and his or her environment. Barbara Davatz, for example, examines how partnerships change over time, while Giorgio von Arb highlights natural surroundings by having those portrayed pose in front of their houses. Sometimes the figures are removed from their surroundings so as to circumvent stubborn clichés – as in Doris Quarella's Urner portraits, for which she chose a neutral white background.

Some photobooks show single persons at various stages in their lives, after the model of the classical family album. Above and beyond the snapshot itself, they also tell us something about changes in society and in everyday life. Iren Stehli's long-term study of a Roma woman, Libuna, in Prague is one example of this. Deriving something that is generally valid from what is most personal and intimate – that is the idea behind the books which explore the photographer's own body or own biography, like Hanna Villiger in *Neid* (1985) and Robert Frank in *The Lines of My Hand* (1972).

Photobooks at www.fotostiftung.ch

Recently a new section has been added to the fully-overhauled www.fotostiftung.ch website, "Fotobücher" – under which a constantly growing number of outstanding Swiss publications can be accessed.

Edition Roman Signer, "Bücher", 1984

To mark the occasion of the anniversary exhibition of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Roman Signer is issuing his work "Bücher", 1984 in an edition of 10 copies. This edition will be on sale at the Fotostiftung Schweiz over the duration of the exhibition in Winterthur.

Roman Signer, "Bücher", 1984.

Silver gelatin print on barite paper, signed, 30 x 45 cm, unframed. Edition 1/10

(photograph by Max Mettler). Price: CHF 3000.– (excl. VAT)

Please contact the reception at the Zentrum für Fotografie or email info@fotostiftung.ch for further information and to order.



Imprint Exhibition

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