

Photography Handmade Books: Redefining the Functions and Missions of Contemporary Photographic Art

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Abstract: In the digital era, the omnipresence of image technologies has radically transformed the ontology of photography. The ease of reproduction and circulation has led to the erosion of the “aura” of photographic images, echoing Walter Benjamin’s (2002) seminal critique of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Within this context, the resurgence of handmade photobooks—an art form integrating photographic imagery with craft-based materiality—offers a distinctive counterpoint to digital homogenization. Handmade photobooks embody a convergence of tactile materiality, non-linear narrative experimentation, and intimate authorship. Through close examination of major exhibitions such as the Hangzhou International Handmade Photobook Biennale (2023), the 23rd Pingyao International Photography Festival (2023), and the Tate Modern Handmade Photobook Joint Exhibition (2025), this study argues that handmade photobooks have shifted from peripheral practice to an increasingly recognized cultural and artistic phenomenon. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from visual culture, book arts, and archival studies, the paper contends that handmade photobooks operate simultaneously as artistic experiments, affective objects, and micro-archives of cultural memory. They retain overlooked fragments of history, bridge personal and collective narratives, and foster the transformation of photography into a “total art” form.

Keywords: Handmade Photobook; Contemporary Photography; Exhibition Studies; Total Art; Micro-Archives

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1.Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a profound reconfiguration of photography as both a medium and cultural practice. The proliferation of digital image technologies has accelerated the reproducibility and accessibility of photographs to an unprecedented degree. This development, however, has also intensified long-standing debates over the status, authenticity, and artistic integrity of photography. As Susan Sontag (2008) observed, photography’s ubiquity risks trivializing its capacity for deep engagement and meaning-making. Roland Barthes (2003), similarly, highlighted the tension between the punctum—the deeply personal detail in a photograph—and its susceptibility to being drowned in mass circulation. In this technological landscape, the handmade photobook has emerged as a critical site of resistance and innovation. Unlike industrially produced photobooks, which serve as tools of mass distribution, handmade photobooks foreground artisanal processes, unique materialities, and individualized narrative strategies. Their experimental qualities position them as both material artifacts and conceptual platforms, allowing artists to navigate the intersection of image, text, and tactile experience. By combining

photographic language with manual craft, handmade photobooks revitalize the cultural role of photography in an era dominated by dematerialized digital images.

This paper explores the historical roots, aesthetic practices, and cultural significance of handmade photobooks in the context of contemporary photography. It examines how handmade photobooks disrupt traditional boundaries between photography, publishing, and book arts, while simultaneously functioning as archives of overlooked histories and intimate experiences. The analysis builds upon three core research questions:

How have handmade photobooks evolved historically, and what distinguishes them from the broader “photobook phenomenon”?

What aesthetic and material innovations characterize contemporary handmade photobooks?

In what ways do handmade photobooks serve as micro-archives that preserve cultural memory and resist the flattening effects of digital reproduction?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to broader debates in art history, visual culture, and archival studies, while situating the handmade photobook as a critical vehicle for redefining the missions and functions of contemporary photographic art.

2. Literature Review

The study of photobooks has developed into a robust interdisciplinary field that bridges photography studies, book history, and visual culture. Scholars and practitioners alike have highlighted the photobook as not merely a secondary form of photographic presentation, but as a primary medium with its own narrative and aesthetic autonomy (Parr & Badger, 2004; Newhall, 1982).

2.1 Photobooks as Artistic Medium

The publication of *The Photobook: A History* (Parr & Badger, 2004) marked a milestone in recognizing the photobook as an independent genre within photographic practice. Parr and Badger emphasized the photobook’s capacity to shape the reception of photographs through sequencing, layout, and design. Beaumont Newhall (1982), one of the foundational figures in photography studies, also underscored the importance of the photobook in articulating the history of photography itself. Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) exemplifies this trajectory by demonstrating how self-published photobooks can disrupt mainstream publishing norms while opening new avenues for conceptual art.

2.2 Handmade Photobooks Phenomenon

In China, interest in photobooks—particularly handmade variants—has expanded significantly in the past decade. Gu Zheng (2020) argued that photobooks play a crucial role in constructing photography’s disciplinary history, especially by preserving the works of marginalized or forgotten photographers. Gu emphasized the handmade photobook’s unique ability to integrate photographs, manuscripts, and archival materials into cohesive narratives that resist historical erasure. Similarly, He Yining (2023), through field research on Chinese handmade photobook production and circulation, revealed how such works function as “living cultural memory.” By allowing localized and minority cultural traditions to enter public discourse, handmade photobooks challenge the dominance of “grand narratives” in cultural transmission.

On the global stage, scholars such as Moritz Neumüller and Clément Chéroux (2021) have emphasized that the photobook phenomenon extends beyond a passing fad. They argue that the photobook serves as a key node in contemporary visual culture, linking individual memories with collective networks of meaning. The proliferation of photobook exhibitions, fairs, and festivals worldwide attests to their increasing cultural significance. The handmade photobook, as a subfield of this broader phenomenon, distinguishes itself through its emphasis on material singularity and the tactile encounter between book and viewer.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations: Aura, Archive, and Memory

The conceptual framework for analyzing handmade photobooks draws upon critical theories of art, reproduction, and cultural memory. Benjamin’s (2002) notion of the “aura” of an artwork—its unique presence in time and space—provides a lens for understanding the handmade photobook’s resistance to digital reproducibility. Each handmade photobook, as a unique or limited-edition object, retains an aura that mass-produced digital images lack. Barthes’ (2003) reflections on photography’s

capacity to pierce through the viewer's subjectivity (punctum) resonate with the affective intimacy of handmade photobooks. Moreover, Sontag's (2008) caution against the desensitization caused by photographic saturation reinforces the necessity of slower, more tactile engagements that handmade photobooks invite.

Recent exhibitions have been pivotal in bringing handmade photobooks into mainstream artistic discourse. The 2023 Hangzhou International Handmade Photobook Biennale showcased a wide range of works integrating material experimentation, non-linear narratives, and participatory elements (Hangzhou Handmade Photobook Biennale Committee, 2023). Similarly, the 23rd Pingyao International Photography Festival (2023) featured a dedicated handmade photobook section, incorporating exhibition zones for multimedia interaction and book exchange (Pingyao Festival Committee, 2023). The Tate Modern's 2025 joint exhibition with the China Academy of Art and the Royal College of Art further solidified the handmade photobook's position within global contemporary art (China Academy of Art & RCA, 2025). These institutional platforms not only validated the artistic significance of handmade photobooks but also fostered new dialogues between artists, curators, and audiences.

Figure1: The Myth of Archimedes, Cao Han, China Academy of Art & RCA, 2025



3. Historical Origins of Handmade Photobooks

The history of handmade photobooks is deeply entangled with both the evolution of photography and the broader trajectory of book arts. While the modern photobook has often been associated with twentieth-century publishing innovations, the origins of handmade photobooks can be traced further back, to the nineteenth century, when photography itself was still in its formative stages. Early photographic albums—painstakingly assembled with salt prints, albumen prints, or cyanotypes mounted on pages—represented not only personal keepsakes but also early explorations of photography as an object embedded within book form (Batchen, 1997).

Figure2: The Pencil of Nature, William Henry Talbot, 1844

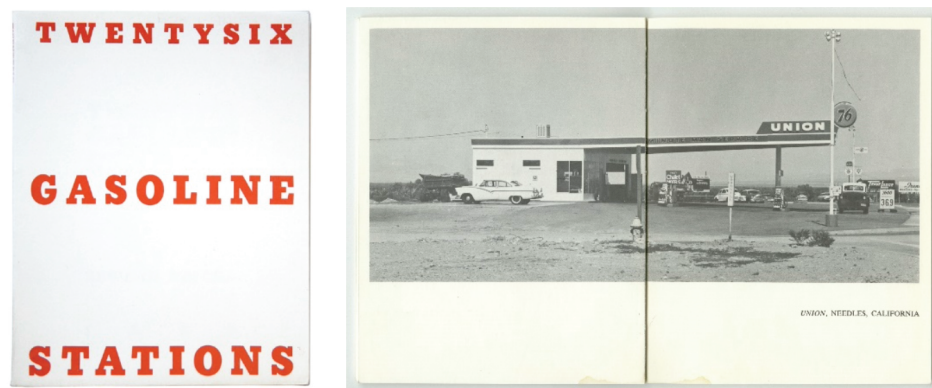


These early albums were characterized by labor-intensive production processes that blurred the line between craft and image. Amateur photographers, many of them women in domestic contexts, meticulously arranged photographs within albums, often embellishing them with handwritten annotations, drawings, and decorations. Such practices foreshadowed the handmade photobook's later emphasis on hybridity, intimacy, and materiality (Langford, 2001). In this sense, the handmade photobook cannot be regarded merely as a recent innovation, but rather as a rearticulation of photography's artisanal roots.

By the twentieth century, the rise of modernist photography brought with it new approaches to the photobook. While avant-garde figures such as László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky experimented with the integration of typography, montage, and photography in mass-produced publications, parallel traditions of handmade or self-published books persisted. Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), often considered a cornerstone of conceptual art, exemplifies the tension between mass production and artisanal sensibility: although technically produced in multiple copies, its minimalist design and rejection of mainstream publishing conventions emphasized the autonomy of the photobook as an artistic statement (Parr & Badger, 2004).

The late twentieth century saw a resurgence of interest in book arts, particularly in North America and Europe, where artist's books began to incorporate photography as a central component. Johanna Drucker (2004) has argued that the artist's book is not simply a container of images but a conceptual space where material form, sequence, and content are inseparable. Handmade photobooks, emerging from this lineage, represent a convergence between artist's books and photography, offering a tactile response to the increasingly dematerialized culture of images. Thus, the handmade photobook today can be understood as both a continuation of photography's earliest material traditions and a critical reinvention that responds to the contemporary digital condition.

Figure3: Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations (1963), Ed Ruscha



4. The Photobook Phenomenon and Global Expansion

The twenty-first century has been characterized by what scholars have described as the “photobook phenomenon” (Neumüller & Chéroux, 2021). This term refers to the explosive growth in the production, exhibition, and collection of photobooks worldwide, encompassing both industrially produced editions and handcrafted works. Several interrelated factors have contributed to this phenomenon: the democratization of self-publishing technologies, the globalization of photography festivals and book fairs, and the increasing recognition of photobooks by museums and academic institutions. Parr and Badger's *The Photobook: A History* (2004, 2006) played a pivotal role in catalyzing scholarly and curatorial interest in photobooks. By compiling an encyclopedic survey of photobooks from across the globe, the volumes underscored the medium's diversity and historical significance. More importantly, they challenged the assumption that photography's history could be fully grasped through prints and exhibitions alone, demonstrating that the sequencing, design, and narrative of photobooks were equally central to photographic meaning-making.

Globally, photobook fairs have become critical nodes for circulation and exchange. Events such as Paris Photo, the New York Art Book Fair, and Tokyo's Photobook Festival provide platforms for independent publishers and artists to present their works outside traditional gallery structures. Within these contexts, handmade photobooks occupy a distinctive niche: while they may not achieve the scale of mass-produced editions, they generate unique encounters between artist and audience. The

intimate scale of such fairs enables tactile engagement, which digital platforms cannot replicate (Badger, 2014). In China, the photobook phenomenon has developed rapidly over the past decade. Major events such as the Shanghai Photobook Fair, the Hangzhou Handmade Photobook Biennale (2023), and the dedicated handmade photobook exhibition section at the 23rd Pingyao International Photography Festival (2023) attest to the growing recognition of photobooks as cultural and artistic artifacts (He, 2023). These exhibitions highlight both local innovations—such as the integration of calligraphy, papermaking, and traditional binding techniques—and global exchanges, as artists and curators collaborate across cultural contexts.

The inclusion of handmade photobooks in institutional exhibitions has further solidified their legitimacy. The Tate Modern's 2025 joint exhibition with the China Academy of Art and the Royal College of Art represented a landmark moment in this regard, situating handmade photobooks within the canon of global contemporary art (China Academy of Art & RCA, 2025). Such recognition underscores the handmade photobook's dual identity: both as a niche practice rooted in artisanal craft and as a central player in contemporary artistic discourse.

5. Handmade Photobooks as Micro-Archives of the Era

One of the most significant contributions of handmade photobooks lies in their role as micro-archives of cultural memory. Unlike digital images, which are infinitely replicable and often consumed ephemerally, handmade photobooks possess a material permanence and a narrative density that allows them to function as repositories of overlooked histories and intimate experiences. Archival theorists such as Diana Taylor (2003) and Ann Cvetkovich (2003) have emphasized that archives are not neutral containers of history but are themselves shaped by affect, politics, and subjectivity. Handmade photobooks embody this perspective by actively curating fragments of lived experience into tangible, tactile forms. For example, He Yining (2023) has documented Chinese handmade photobooks that incorporate oral histories, family photographs, and ephemera from minority communities. These works resist assimilation into dominant cultural narratives, instead preserving the micro-histories of marginalized groups.

The archival potential of handmade photobooks is also linked to their emphasis on singularity and non-linear storytelling. Unlike traditional archival institutions, which privilege chronological order and standardized formats, handmade photobooks often employ fragmented sequencing, layered materials, and experimental bindings. This creates what Jacques Derrida (1996) referred to as “archive fever”: a dynamic interplay between preservation and reinterpretation, between stability and instability. Each handmade photobook, in this sense, is less a static archive than a living archive—one that invites reinterpretation and reactivation with each reading. Furthermore, handmade photobooks frequently function as counter-archives in response to the saturation of digital images. As Sontag (2008) warned, the ubiquity of photography risks eroding its emotional impact. Handmade photobooks counteract this tendency by demanding slow, tactile engagement. The turning of pages, the feel of handmade paper, and the presence of unique binding structures all foster a mode of reading that reintroduces affective resonance into the photographic encounter.

Recent exhibitions have foregrounded this archival function explicitly. The 2023 Hangzhou Biennale included a section titled “Micro-Archives of the Everyday,” where artists presented photobooks constructed from personal diaries, found photographs, and community archives (Hangzhou Handmade Photobook Biennale Committee, 2023). These works exemplify how handmade photobooks can bridge personal memory with broader cultural histories, thereby expanding photography's role as both an artistic medium and a social archive. In this way, handmade photobooks not only revitalize photography's aesthetic possibilities but also redefine its cultural missions. They preserve details of lived experience that might otherwise disappear in the flow of digital images, offering future generations a textured and embodied record of the present.

6. Aesthetic and Material Dimensions of Handmade Photobooks

A defining characteristic of handmade photobooks is their deep entanglement of materiality and aesthetics. Unlike industrially printed photobooks, which often prioritize uniformity and reproducibility, handmade photobooks foreground tactile qualities—paper texture, binding techniques, the smell of ink, or the irregularity of hand stitching—as essential components of meaning-making. As Drucker (2004) has argued in the context of artist's books, the physical form is not merely a neutral container but actively participates in the construction of narrative and affect. One key aesthetic strategy in

handmade photobooks is the use of non-linear sequencing. Whereas traditional photobooks often rely on linear, chronological progression, handmade photobooks frequently embrace fragmentation, juxtaposition, and recursive structures. This strategy aligns with broader postmodern aesthetics, which challenge grand narratives and instead foreground multiplicity and subjectivity (Lyotard, 1984). For example, Japanese artist Rinko Kawauchi's limited-edition hand-bound photobook *Ametsuchi* (2013) deploys loose sequencing and visual echoing across spreads, inviting viewers into a cyclical meditation on memory and nature.

Figure4: *Ametsuchi* (2013), Rinko Kawauchi



Material innovation further expands the aesthetic vocabulary of handmade photobooks. Some artists incorporate found objects, textiles, or organic materials into the book form, thereby transforming the photobook into a hybrid object that traverses photography, sculpture, and installation. Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* (2012), although not strictly a photobook, illustrates how material experimentation within book arts can destabilize conventional boundaries of medium and language (Xu, 2012). Photographers working with handmade books often adopt similar strategies, embedding dried plants, handwritten notes, or fragments of archival documents into the pages, thus weaving together layers of text, image, and objecthood. In addition, the aura of the unique object, as theorized by Walter Benjamin (1968), plays a central role in the handmade photobook's aesthetic appeal. While Benjamin critiqued the loss of aura in mechanically reproduced works of art, handmade photobooks deliberately reassert this aura through their singularity and artisanal qualities. Each copy, often limited to editions of one or a few, carries traces of the artist's hand—stitching, folding, or gluing—that resist the anonymity of mass production. This uniqueness fosters an intimate dialogue between the reader and the object, reestablishing a sense of authenticity in an era saturated with digital replication.

Figure5: *Book from the Ground* (2012), Xu Bing



Finally, the aesthetic impact of handmade photobooks is inseparable from the ritual of reading. Unlike scrolling through digital images, engaging with a handmade photobook requires slowness, attention, and care. The turning of pages becomes an embodied act that reinforces the book's narrative rhythms. As Badger (2014) notes, the photobook is a time-based medium: its meaning unfolds not in a single glance but through the temporality of reading. Handmade photobooks accentuate this temporality, transforming viewing into an aesthetic and performative experience.

7. Contemporary Practices and Future Directions

Contemporary practices of handmade photobooks are shaped by both technological shifts and socio-political conditions. In the digital era, where online platforms and print-on-demand services have democratized self-publishing, the handmade photobook stands out as a counter-movement, emphasizing slowness, tactility, and artisanal engagement. Yet, rather than opposing digitality outright, many contemporary artists integrate digital tools into their handmade processes, creating hybrid works that combine inkjet printing with hand-binding or laser-cutting with traditional papermaking (Neumüller & Chéroux, 2021).

A notable trend is the increasing emphasis on collaborative and community-based photobook practices. For instance, Latin American collectives such as La Hydra (Mexico City) and Colectivo FotoLibro (Buenos Aires) have organized workshops where participants co-create handmade photobooks using shared archives and local materials (Longoni, 2018). These practices foreground the photobook not only as an individual artwork but also as a social process, fostering collective memory and solidarity. Another emerging direction is the ecological turn in handmade photobook production. Responding to the climate crisis and environmental concerns, some artists adopt sustainable materials—recycled paper, natural dyes, or biodegradable bindings—thereby aligning the photobook with eco-art discourses (Miles, 2014). This orientation highlights how material choices in handmade photobooks can resonate with broader ethical and political commitments.

At the institutional level, handmade photobooks are increasingly incorporated into museum collections, academic curricula, and archival initiatives. The International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York, for example, has dedicated acquisitions to self-published and handmade photobooks, recognizing their historical and pedagogical significance (ICP, 2022). Similarly, art schools in China, Japan, and Europe have introduced courses that teach students both digital publishing and hand-binding techniques, preparing a new generation of photographers to navigate the intersection of craft and technology (He, 2023). Looking ahead, the future of handmade photobooks may lie in expanded forms of exhibition and interactivity. Some artists have begun experimenting with augmented reality (AR) overlays or interactive digital companions to their handmade books, thereby creating multi-layered experiences that extend beyond the page. Others explore site-specific presentations, where photobooks are displayed as sculptural installations or activated through performative readings. These hybrid practices point toward a future where the handmade photobook remains adaptable, resilient, and deeply relevant to contemporary artistic discourse.

Conclusion

The Handmade photobooks represent a crucial intervention in the contemporary photographic landscape. Emerging from photography's nineteenth-century material traditions and shaped by the twentieth-century photobook phenomenon, they occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of craft, narrative, and cultural memory. Their material innovations and aesthetic strategies challenge the dominance of digital images, reasserting the value of slowness, tactility, and artisanal authorship. As micro-archives, handmade photobooks preserve the overlooked and the ephemeral, constructing intimate records of lived experience that resist assimilation into dominant narratives. As aesthetic objects, they foreground the interplay between material form and photographic content, reintroducing aura and ritual into the photographic encounter. And as social practices, they foster collaboration, ecological responsibility, and cross-cultural dialogue.

In an age of image overproduction, handmade photobooks redefine photography's artistic mission and social function. They remind us that photographs need not exist solely as dematerialized pixels or infinitely replicable files; instead, they can inhabit crafted, singular, and embodied forms that anchor memory, affect, and meaning. Thus, the handmade photobook is not merely a nostalgic return to pre-digital craft but a forward-looking medium that continues to expand photography's possibilities as both art and archive.

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