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**Poetics, Materialities, Performances:  
Greek Photographic Books 2000–2023**

Alexandra Moschovi

PHB23



From Anna Atkins's self-published book, *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843), and William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, the first commercially produced photographic book (1844–46), the book, alongside commercial, corporate, and family photo albums, has been part and parcel of the photograph's habitat. While, in the first half of the twentieth century, art museums were still sceptical about accommodating photographs as artworks on their walls, advancements in photographic and reprographic technologies enabled photographers and artists—from Claude Cahun, Brassai, Karl Blossfeldt, Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Dorothea Lange, and Bill Brandt, to Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Klein, Robert Frank, Ed Ruscha, Eikoh Hosoe, and Daido Moriyama—to employ the book as an autonomous narrative work—a “photobookwork” according to photographer and curator Alex Sweetman (1985)—and a vehicle for mediating their work to wider audiences.

The de/materialisation of photographic images on different digital devices and online environments in the 2000s reactivated the interest in the printed page. At the same time, new digital technologies, which made publishing cheaper and facilitated self-publishing, triggered the renaissance of the photographic book, with unprecedented numbers of publications circulating in digital and physical formats. With the exception of ‘seminal’ publications, the cultural significance, the life and afterlife of photographic books were overlooked in art or social histories of photography in the previous century. Yet, the heightened currency of the reconceptualised twentieth-first century “photobook,” together with booklets, zines, and newspapers, in contemporary photographic practices increased scholarly and curatorial interest in photographic books manifested in surveys (Roth, 2001; Parr and Badger, 2004, 2006, 2014), doctoral theses, monographs, and anthologies (Armstrong, 1998; Roth, 2004; Di Bello et al., 2012; Carlin, 2021) as well as in an increasing number of exhibitions (e.g., *The Open Book* at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2005 and *The Photobook Phenomenon* at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in 2017) and dedicated festivals (e.g., the Fotobookfestival Kassel, OffPrint Paris, and the FORMAT Photobook Market). Art dealers now also market limited edition “photobooks,” and museums, such as the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum in Britain, actively acquire and display photographic books as part of their collections.

Photographic publications in Greece were on a slow trajectory for most of the twentieth century. Until the turn of the millennium, the lack of institutional infrastructure and consistent state support for photography and the wider curatorial and commercial publishing disinterest in creative photographic practice would limit photographers' publishing options. Independent photographic organizations, namely the Hellenic Photographic Society (est. 1952), Parallaxis (est. 1984), the Hellenic Centre for Photography (est. 1986, Pontix Publications), the Photography Circle (est. 1988, Photochoros Publications), and Camera Obscura (est. 1988) would facilitate and fund modest monographic publications, and portfolios, exhibition catalogues and booklets, as academic and art publishers would slowly come to embrace photography, and photographers, Yiorgos Depollas (FOTORAMA), Nikos Kasseris (Kasseris Publications), and George Meis (MEIS Studio) among others, would set up their own companies for publishing travel and creative photography books. A number of important photographic books alongside photography textbooks were published in the 1980s and 1990s, becoming important reference material and educating successive generations of Greek photographers, several of whom would creatively engage with the book as an art form in its own right.

The exhibition *Poetics, Materialities, Performances: Greek Photographic Books 2000–2023* seeks to situate the photographic book centrally in the museum, not as supplementary material accompanying prints. The aim of the exhibition is twofold. Firstly, it explores the renaissance and democratisation of the photographic book in Greece at a time when digital technologies transformed the local publishing landscape enabling cost-efficient production, self-publishing, and international dissemination. That was also the time when photography was belatedly institutionalised as art on a par with painting and sculpture in the Greek art scene, being accommodated in the art museum and the commercial gallery and finding a permanent home in the first national photography museum, the MOMus-Thessaloniki Museum of Photography. This development triggered a rise in sponsored photographic books and retrospective and thematic monographs, alongside an increased volume of commercial publications and self-published books. Furthermore, as photographic books respond to and reflect diverse pictorial approaches and trends, this curatorial proposition seeks to offer a concise overview of contemporary photographic practices. To this end, the selection is cross-generational and includes books that have been published in the period 2000–2023 but may cover a broader context of practice dating back to the 1970s. Among the exhibits are publications by a younger generation of creative practitioners who expand or challenge preceding practices, through visual and material experimentations.

A hard-and-fast definition of what in the twenty-first century has been rebranded as “photo-book” proves essentially problematic, more so in the Greek context, no less owing to the multiple types and uses of photographic books. And indeed, as art historian Elizabeth Shannon argues, the term “photobook” has resulted in the “misleading homogenisation of a vast swathe of published photographic material” (2010, 55). Photographer Martin Parr and critic Gerry Badger described the “photobook” as “a book, with or without text, where the work’s primary message is carried by photographs” (Badger, 2004, 6). They posited that what matters is how the images work together so that “the sum by definition is greater than the part” with intention and ambition, visual narrative and form being key qualifiers (Badger, 2004, 7, 8). While such parameters are also considered, the term “photobook,” which can be concurrently wide (is often interchangeably used to describe all photographically illustrated books) and self-limiting (when considered solely as an equivalent to the artist’s book), does not capture the diversity of publications featuring in the present exhibition. In this context, the use of the more inclusive adjective “photographic” as opposed to the medium-specific noun “photography” is employed as a more apt term that can describe publications that have been produced in the “expanded” field of photographic practice. What is more, the photographic book is considered as a complex social artefact that can produce, as photography scholar Briony Carlin claims, “material-discursive intra-action between matter, space, time, and meaning-making” and which is activated through its physical “encounters” with readers (2021, 46).

Given the sheer abundance of titles produced in Greece in the past two decades and spatial and practical constraints, including the scarcity of publications with limited tirage, the exhibition does not attempt to provide a definitive history of the Greek photographic book in the twenty-first century. Instead, it employs a diagrammatic approach to the variety, commonalities, and oppositions of contemporary bookmaking practices. In this spirit, the selection encompasses monographic publications that may focus on a specific body of work or present a curated retrospective, exhibition publications, and self-published books. Photographically illustrated books in which photographs function primarily as illustrations, or publications with a predominately informative purpose, have not been included.

The books on display present a kaleidoscope of photographic practices, spanning from landscape, street, studio, directorial, and diaristic photography to social documentary, conflict pho-

tography, and re-articulations of “the photographic,” which often arise from the intersection of photography with various other media, such as digital media and painting. They feature diverse methodological approaches— from ethnographic, autobiographic, autoethnographic methods to appropriation and bricolage tactics. They also address a wide array of topics, including identities, the Greek crisis, history and collective memory, the interplay between nature and culture, communities, societal issues, and politics.

The title of the exhibition indicates three methodological approaches to the materials. Poetics, that is, the storytelling mechanisms, the editing and sequencing of the photographs, the dialectical juxtaposition of text, images, and graphic design, plays a pivotal role in this exploration. Equally significant are the materiality and objecthood of these publications, including their size and format, the paper thickness and texture, all of which are integral parts of their narrative and haptic experience, whether one is looking at a voluminous hardcover book, or a small paperback that combines vernacular reprographic practices and hand-made elements. Lastly, the exhibition highlights how photographic books perform as visual and textual propositions and as cultural experiences and examines the impact these performances have on audiences and the histories of Greek photography.

Photographic books “invite both haptic and visual indulgence” and “speak of a tactile engagement with images beyond the visual, for which there is no equivalent in the gallery space,” as noted by art historians Patricia Di Bello and Shamoan Zamir (2012, 6 and 10). This exhibition seeks to overcome the limitations of showcasing photographic books in museum exhibitions, often experienced through glass vitrines, or as video flick-through on screens, which are practices that suppress the physicality, material qualities, and “haptic indulgence” of the book. The purpose of a book is to be leafed through and read. In line with this principle, the exhibition is designed as an interactive display that invites touch and contemplation. All exhibits are readily accessible and can be read separately and as part of a larger narrative, expanding beyond the curatorial voice. Here, visitors are not passive spectators but active participants whose individuality determines the ways the books are handled and their journey of multiple associations.

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