

# The Print, the book, the screen

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Photographs are strange entities. Much like a chameleon can change the colour of its skin, based on their environment photographs can change some of their properties, while essentially still keeping their essence. Crucially, for the most part a photograph's meaning derives from its use and context and from what a viewer might bring to it.

On their own, photographs have no meanings. Actually, even to talk about photographs “on their own” makes very little sense. We always see photographs in some context. We never see photographs outside of any context. One could argue that latent photographs exist “on their own”. But here, I don't want to deal with the metaphysics of photography.

A different way of expressing the above would be to say that when we see photographs, we always see them tied to some carrier — however strongly or loosely — and surrounded by something. This is such an obvious statement that most photographers don't think about it much. However, it deserves to not only be thought about, it actually needs to be understood.

The three carriers of a photograph are the photographic print, the book, and the screen. Approaching photographs this way simplifies things a little bit. But it's straightforward to subsume another form that seemingly isn't covered by these three modes into one of them (a picture in a newspaper would fall under “book” — after all, a newspaper is a form of book, a poster is a form of print, etc.).



*Awoiska van der Molen — Fukushima, 2017; photograph by Awoiska van der Molen*

If you think about it, the traditional photographic print is an anomaly. With inkjet printers being ubiquitous, the distinction between a photograph printed in a book or on some piece of paper with an inkjet printer isn't that massive. But the history of the medium set up our thinking about photographs in ways that now often seem counterintuitive (and often pretty useless): historically, there first were prints and then, decades later, there were way to mass produce photographs using ink. Actually, there first were objects that weren't reproducible, then came prints.

So the history of photography isn't necessarily the best guide for considerations of what form a picture might take, because it started out with extremely limited ways of producing photographs. This fact wouldn't be so bad if something else hadn't happened: over time people tried to make their thinking around new technologies conform to the limited earlier versions — instead of the other way around.

For example, once digital photography had become widely established, there were a lot of things you could do easily that in the analogue world were very difficult and that often carried negative connotations. A good approach would have been to simply accept the fact that digital photographs can be "manipulated" easily and in a large variety of ways — instead of sticking with photographic orthodoxy and worrying about the supposed ill effects of manipulation.



*Awoiska van der Molen – Fukushima 2017; detail of the print's surface; photograph by Awoiska van der Molen*

In vast parts of photoland, the print is still being treated as this magical entity that for a lot of practitioners is *the* expression of what a photograph ought to look like. You can do that. But you're also going to simply miss out on what photography's other forms have to offer.

(Please note that in the following, I'll be focusing on art photography. When you see the word "photography", you will always want to add "art" in front of it.)

Obviously, it doesn't help that the commercial world of photography – galleries and collectors – just *love* the idea of the unique object. If it's not fully unique (most photographs simply aren't – they can be made in any number), then they will have to be artificially limited: editions.

In the end, Gallerists don't sell photographs, they sell an object that has an aura – to use Walter Benjamin's term, and for most photographs (there are exceptions), the aura solely derives from the edition number. (Another way to describe what gallerists do would be to say they sell decorations that come with a form of prestige.)

The commerce-based world of photography exaggerates the aura even further by showing such photographs in often very expensive frames in very large spaces whose walls have been painted white. Galleries try very hard to look like museums (and not like the showrooms that actually are), because by construction (in our society) a museum comes with certain ideas attached: careful curation and a larger cultural prestige.

Obviously, both of these aspects are hugely problematic for a variety of reasons, but that's a different discussion. (In reality, museums have now become just some other part of the world of art commerce).

But you might wonder why of all forms of the print, it's the most elitist one — the framed print in a frame in a white cube — that is the go-to guide for most artists. Why can't posters be made and sold cheaply? Why can't such posters be shown in more democratic settings? There are a lot of options for prints that aren't explored at all — which says a lot about the world of photography and its inherent elitism.



*Partial installation view of two of Awoiska van der Molen's photographs at Pier 24; photograph by Pier 24*

The complete opposite mode is provided by the screen, wherever it might exist. Your screen doesn't have much, if any prestige. For sure there's no careful curation when you scroll through, let's say, your Instagram feed. So a photograph on a screen has no aura. It shows up for some period of time, however long or usually short this might be, and then it disappears.

Given the preceding it's hardly surprising that most artists don't take the screen seriously. There still are plenty of practitioners who'll proudly proclaim they're not on Instagram simply because — and this part is implied but not said out loud — that's for the hoi polloi.

The book lives somewhere in between these two. In some ways, it's similar to the photographic print — it's literally printed, so there is an object. In other ways, it's a lot closer to the screen, especially given its potential to exist in very large numbers.

The funny thing about books is that they can have an aura, even though they're mass produced. That aura is being generated by a variety of factors — including its owner's actions or even just the fact that there is or was an owner (maybe you own a book that you inherited from a loved one: it's the same book that a lot of other people own, but *for you*, it's special).

To sum up where we are so far: Photographs have no meaning on their own. They take on some meaning through the way they are produced and used. They also take on a value or aura based on what carrier they appear on. That value can comprise a lot of factors. In the world of photography, the value is almost entirely based on commerce and on a generally unspoken and widely shared sense of elitism.

Whatever you make of the preceding, it seems clear that if you want to show your photographs to someone, you will have to think about how to do that. It's tempting to think about this as merely a presentation problem. But the reality is a lot more complex.



*Detail view of Awoiska van der Molen — Sequester (FW: Books, 2014); photograph by Michael Vahrenwald, taken from Colberg — Understanding Photobooks (Focal Press, 2016)*

Realistically speaking, you will want to use all three forms. That way, you can make sure your work will be as widely seen as possible. Even if you don't want to make a photobook, some magazine might ask you for pictures so they can write you up, and then you have to think about that. Or maybe you're really a book person, but then some curator gets in touch and says something like "Hey, I really like this book you made, and I'd love to show your work in this festival I was asked to curate." Or someone gets in touch and says they want to show your work on their widely read journal, which, however, only exists as a website (it's 2020).

You can always say "no, thanks, I don't want to show my work in any other form other than what I envisioned". In that case, people will very quickly note that you're difficult to work with, so they will stop asking. But most photographers will embrace the challenge and produce something that can work.

Ideally, though, this is something you think about while you're making the work: What am I trying to communicate? In what form should this exist? What is the desired context that I am going to place this work in? How could this work function in a different context?

Based on my own observations, most artists spend a lot of time thinking about only one of the three photographic modes, while either ignoring the other two or treating them like unpleasant afterthoughts. I think that's a big mistake.

Most artists will also only contemplate the “serious” photobook (ask people what they think about “zines” and watch their faces) and the white-cube gallery. I personally think that’s another big mistake — unless you’re happy of existing in very small stratified world, with a very small audience and very few people who spend money.

The key here is not to agree with me. If that’s your world, I think that’s great (for you). But at the very least you ought to ask yourself why you think your work should only exist there — and not in other contexts.



*Surface detail of page in Awoiska van der Molen — The Living Mountain (FW: Books, 2020); photograph by Awoiska van der Molen*

If you're really into your darkroom prints, you still want to think about how your photographs could be presented in a book or on a screen. The reality is that the number of people who can afford your prints is very, very small — unlike, possibly, the number of people who enjoy looking at them.

If you're really into photobooks, you still want to think about what a photographic print might look like, given that a festival or museum might want to show them.

Now, as a book maker, you could just tell them to show the book. In 999 cases out of 1,000, this would be the absolute worst idea I could think of. A book is not a gallery (or museum), and a gallery is not a book. And how would the screen even fit into this?

Peter Puklus' *Handbook to the Stars* provides an example where [showing books in a gallery space actually worked](#). But in this case, the books become sculptural. And you don't look at them as books but rather as elements of an installation. So the experiences of looking at the book in your lap and of looking at the installation are not the same at all.



*Installation view of Awoiska van der Molen's photographs at MMK Frankfurt; photograph by Axel Schneider*

The experience *in* a gallery will always be very different than the experience you'll have *with* a book, and that in turn is very different than the experience you might have with any number of screens (a phone screen is very different than a desktop screen — size wise, but also in terms of how we physically engage with them).

A gallery provides a semi-public experience, whereas a book is completely private. Regardless of however many copies there are of the book, the one you'll be holding in your lap (or looking at on your table) is *your* book. It might not have been made for you alone. But if it's done well, it will make you think that. Why would you take this crucial aspect of the book away from the book?

A screen also is private, but it typically doesn't feel as if it were made for you. In a year or two, you'll be trading in the phone you're holding anyway, so it's unlikely you'll be as attached to it as to a book.

Another way to approach the topic would be to ask: why would anyone go to a gallery to look at books (unless it's a show about books, and that's not what I'm talking about here.)? What's the point of that? It's a complete confusion of experiences.

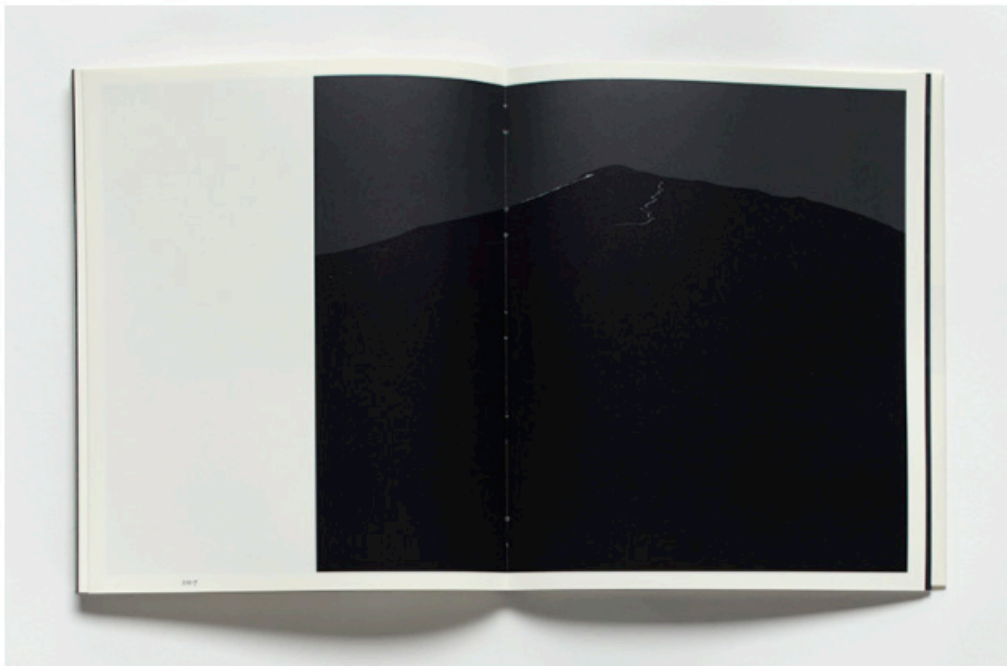
So you really want to think about what you put into these different entities — print, book, screen, and how you can do it well. “Well” here means: fully adapted to the medium at hand, making most of its inherent strengths — while taking good care of its weaknesses. And all of that will have to be in service of your work.

You can pick one of them as the desired way to show your photographs (it’s possible, sometimes even likely that the work will dictate its ideal way of presentation). But like I wrote above you really have to be able to cover the other two well.

Here’s the thing: everybody can relatively easily spot a shitty print or a badly made book or a lousy website. It’s like graphic design: even if you wouldn’t know how to do it well, you can see when it’s not done well.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve walked into a gallery with shitty prints and walked straight back out, how many times I’ve picked up a badly made book and put it straight back on the table, visited a badly made website and closed the browser tab right away. It’s not that I think that “life’s too short” (it is, but that’s not a good approach for criticism).

But why should I look at something that you didn’t put the care into that the work might have demanded, that the work might have required? If you don’t care about your pictures, why would you expect anyone else to?



*Awoiska van der Molen — Sequester (FW: Books, 2014); photograph by Michael Vahrenwald, taken from Colberg — Understanding Photobooks (Focal Press, 2016)*

I will remember the occasions when I walked into a gallery and was just floored by the beauty of what was on display — the photographs and the production. The same is true for books, and there are even some websites that are absolutely marvelous. As a critic that’s what I’m looking for: photography that has been provided with the care it required, *given its intended context and desired meaning*.

Intended context and desired meaning are absolutely crucial. Otherwise, you risk falling into the production-fetish trap, where the work becomes more about what a crafty darkroom printer you are or how many layers of ink your book printer used than the actual end result itself (screen presentation still changes much too rapidly to assign one such production fetish — there always is one, but the year after, there probably is another one).



Regardless of where you'll be coming from, there will be two main challenges: first, how can you produce the main expression of your work well, whether it's the photographic print, the book, or whatever else? And second, how can you translate that expression into the other two modes, knowing full well that a one-to-one translation almost always is impossible?

The third challenge might be: can you think of ways of showing your work outside of the photobook (sold at photobook fairs) or expensive prints (sold in white-cube galleries)? Based on my experience teaching for a decade, I don't expect many artists to engage with that challenge.

If your work exists as silver-gelatin prints that you spend a lot of time on in your darkroom, the images will simply never look the same in a book. A book layers ink on paper. The surfaces will look very different, and the same picture simply will not look the same. The obvious question is: why would the two modes have to look exactly identical? That's a dogmatic approach that too often poses an impossible problem to solve.

It might help to consider the case of literature: a book in its original language isn't the same as a translated one. In fact, there are different schools of translation, and as far as I understand it, the jury is still out what exactly is meant by the term "a good translation". Is it a translation that stays as close as possible to the original, even if the two languages operate quite differently? Or is it a translation that stays close to the spirit of the book, while making good use of the language it's translated into?

How do you translate what a silver-gelatin print looks like into something that exists in a book (ink on paper)? A exact one-to-one translation is impossible (unless you want to paste in prints into a book). So you will have to go for something that expresses the spirit of the work — and that realization will then not only help you make a good book, it will also inform you more deeply about the work itself.



*Awoiska van der Molen — The Living Mountain (FW: Books, 2020); photograph by Awoiska van der Molen*

[Awoiska van der Molen](#) very kindly provided pictures of the different modes of presentation she has been using for her work. The main focus of her work is centered on analogue prints, many of which are rather large. But she has also made books with Dutch [publisher](#), designer, and production expert [Hans Gremmen](#).

I don't know to what extent the two would agree with my description of the prints and books. But I'd argue that they have completely broken the idea of the one-to-one correspondence, to instead have the books bring out the qualities of the photographs in their own unique ways. The end result are very different, but they're very beautiful.

This collaboration between a photographer and publisher is a very good example of how as a photographer, you don't have to solve all the problems on your own. Much like how many photographers employ other people to print work in their studio, you could work with a publisher who will help you with the translation of your photographs into the form of the book.

The key is that you know what the work should look like (and why). And then you have to be willing and able to accept that the form might stray far from the probably rather simplistic ideas you had yourself.

So you don't have to come up with all the answers for the various problems presented to you. Consult with experts in those areas where you're lost at sea. But for sure understand your own work — and allow it to live outside of your own personal comfort zone.

One final thought: I have the feeling that the screen has so far been underutilized. Sure, many artists have nice websites. But more often than not, they're electronic lookbooks. As is demonstrated by the [Imperial Courts](#) site (billed as a “web documentary by [photographer] Dana Lixenberg and Eefje Blankevoort”), more definitely is possible.

*I'm indebted to Awoiska van der Molen for allowing me to show her work as an example and for taking some of the photographs just for this occasion — thank you!*