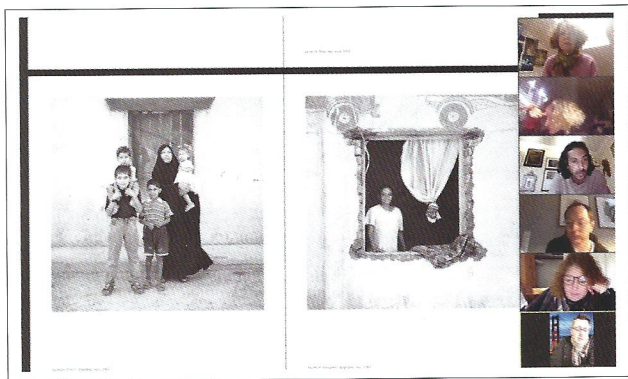


DEB HEMLEY

Exploring the Photobook

During the pandemic, art organizations have gone to great lengths to offer virtual programs, workshops, and artist talks. Over the months, many, including myself, have enjoyed the rich experience of attending bi-monthly, free online photobook groups hosted by J. Sybylla Smith, an independent curator, educator, and consultant of contemporary photography based in Somerville, MA. Smith was scheduled to offer her first photobook group for local participants at her Union Square studio in early March 2020, yet when COVID-19 shutdowns shattered that plan, she made adjustments to meet virtually on Zoom. Each bi-monthly group focuses on a recent title from a contemporary photographer or editor. The book group debuted with a conversation regarding Sean Hemmerle's *Them*, and featured both Hemmerle and Cologne-based gallerist, Julian Sander.

Listening to Smith for even a few minutes, one observes her passion for photography and photobooks. She wholeheartedly identifies with punctum, the "sensory, intensely subjective effect a photograph has on the viewer," that Roland Barthes so poignantly described in his seminal book, *Camera Lucida*, in 1980.



"Punctum is an object or image that jumps out at the viewer within a photograph—"that accident which pricks, bruises me." The word punctum offers an aha moment: Wait, there's a way to express that feeling I've had—and that you've had, too?

New to photobooks, I've learned that they're special gems. Although many are published in small run editions, they hold the larger vision of a photographer and especially offer inspiration and connection during these isolating times.

As Charlotte Cotton, author of *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* writes, "Photographers share a commitment to making their own contribution to the physical and intellectual space of culture...elaborating, pinpointing, and making departures... it becomes increasingly evident that contemporary art photography is driven by the astute and active choices of its makers."

The photobook groups have explored myriad cultural themes: gender, identity, war, conflict photography, addiction, loss and grief, longing, absence, and love. Smith conducts unscripted conversations with the photographer or editor and hones in on their process and vision for the work. In each session, one can see that she's done a deep dive into the book; poured over the photographs, read all accompanying text and essays. Smith's questions spark the dialogue: What brought the photographer to this work that they have spent countless years on, and in many cases, large sums of money to produce? And she treads lightly when she senses that a particular photograph may be personal or may have a profound effect on the photographer; showing glimmers of an earlier career as a clinical social worker.

The feeling in the group is warm and intimate, much like a book group you've attended in a friend's living room. During the Q & A, questions flow freely about the photographers' process. How has this project grown? Expand upon the historical references. How long did each step

take—crowdfunding, editing/sequencing, design, print? Technical questions abound regarding the photographers' equipment—digital, film, make of camera? Tripod? Lights: natural or flash? Inevitably someone asks what I imagine we are all thinking: "I'm interested in better understanding my visual voice but have difficulty defining it and articulating my work."

The important role of photobooks becomes even clearer as the months go on. Martin Parr, British documentary photographer, writes in



Above: J. Sybylla Smith in her studio, holding the books she covered this Fall. Her studio has an art library with browsing hours. Photo: Eliza Luden.

Left: A screenshot from the Spring session featuring American photographer Sean Hemmerle's monograph, *THEM*, published in collaboration with the Julian Sander Gallery in Cologne, Germany. Both are on the call. Screenshot courtesy of Deb Hemley.

The Photobook: A History, Volume II, "Photographers learn more about their medium from other photographers' books than from any other source." As participants, we further identify with our longing to observe and be seen and "articulate our personal narratives and human stories," as Cotton says of photographers during pre-pandemic times. In this COVID climate, not only do we want to show-up—we need to be seen and heard—and have our experiences validated.

Smith is currently at work lining up her 2021 calendar. Although she has received many accolades for her offerings during the pandemic, she is remarkably humble. "Salvation" she says, "is being expansive and collective. The photobook book group is my way of being in there, throwing photobook after photobook into a great big pond, hoping those ripples hit all kinds of people. To bring joy and enlightenment. To bring the resolve to keep going and to keep looking."

Under her tutelage, we will.

Deb Hemley, a writer and artist in Massachusetts, focuses on creativity.

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