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Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand

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Professor Slifkin

“Beautiful to Open and Pleasurable to Leaf Through:”¹

The Art and Craft of Reproduction in Lee Friedlander’s Early Photobooks

In the 1970s, a photomechanical reproduction revolution was underway as printers, such as Richard Benson of the Meridan Gravure Company in Connecticut, were experimenting with methods to translate the tonal complexities of silver gelatin photographs into ink on paper. In doing so, they would further the role of photobooks as an important component of modern photography. Photographer Lee Friedlander had been shooting film since the 1950s, but it was not until the ‘70s that he became interested in putting his work into book format. For his first solo book project, *Self Portrait*, he was teamed up with Benson, and as a collaborative team they helped revolutionize offset lithographic printing for the world of photography. Friedlander has prolifically produced photobooks ever since, and his output raises questions about the nature of reproduction, the role of craft in the art of photographs in ink, and how the book format necessarily changes the viewing experience for photography.

When photographs are brought together as a collection, they resonate with each other, providing additional information and meaning for each individual image; the whole is greater

¹ Parr, 4. “The combination of remarkable images and good design in a book that is beautiful to open and pleasurable to leaf through is an ideal way of conveying a photographer’s ideas and statements.”

than the sum of its parts. This notion, according to Peter Galassi in his essay for Friedlander's 2004 monograph publication, is fundamental to modern photography:

“Considered one by one, some of the pictures are inevitably better than others, but the sense of the whole depends upon the profusion of its parts.”²

To further the connection, photographs can be literally bound together as pages of a photobook; the physical connection makes the collective meaning paramount. As with a book of text, the photobook can be read from cover to cover. The premise that the collective meaning is of greater importance than the meaning of the individual images is what differentiates a photobook from other bound collections of images—such as, for instance, a monograph publication. The photobook, in addition to the collective meaning of the images within, also has meaning as an object distinct from the photographic print. Photography critic Ralph Prins has commented on this new life:

“A photo book is an autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film. The photographs lose their own photographic character as things ‘in themselves’ and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.”³

A well-designed photobook may even be considered the ideal way, at least for some photographers, to display their images. In this format, the viewer can engage with the photographs while being able to easily reference others in the body of work. For an optimal experience, the design of the book should not detract from the photographs in any way and should complement the images to whatever extent is possible.⁴ For example, in the trade publication of *Cherry Blossom Time in Japan: The Complete Works*, the images are separated into the

² Galassi, “You Have to Change to Stay the Same”, 14.

³ Parr, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

vertical and the horizontal; the book is actually double-sided, with each orientation residing in its own half. Thus, the experience of viewing the images becomes more immersive, as the switching of formats between vertical and horizontal within pages does not distract the viewer. Moreover, it allows for the images to fill the page, becoming more expansive instead of feeling contained within a white space. The addition of such a design element furthers the notion of the book as a distinctive object—“an autonomous art form.”⁵

During the 1960s and '70s, experimentation in printing attempted to accurately translate the photographic medium into ink in order to globalize creative photography. The photobook helped to achieve this goal with its ability to exist in between the gallery walls of the art world and books of everyday life. Lee Friedlander began his prolific outpouring of photobooks during this period, when his collaboration with Richard Benson was initiated for the creation of the appropriately self-published *Self Portrait*, in 1970. In the Friedlander monograph publication, Benson expresses the attention that was being placed on the role of the photobook as a means of elevating the photographic medium during the early '70s when he was experimenting with translating Friedlander's photographs to ink:

“It is important to note here that all through this period I was being educated, and pushed, by a group of unconnected people who were all convinced of the importance of fine printing in the establishment of photography as the central art form of our time. Books were the obvious means through which photographs were to be widely seen, and to the minds of these people, no sin was greater than making a book that didn't at least try to render the beauty of a fine photographic print in ink.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Benson, “Working with Lee,” 440.

If photographs could be successfully transcribed through printing onto the pages of the book, the art form would not only reach a wider audience but bodies of work would be able to exist in a format that could be personally interacted with—through the act of leafing through pages—and to which one could easily return for continued observance.

While these concepts were becoming important for the role of photography, the technical challenge of accurate translation across materials remained. While the collaboration of Friedlander and Benson illustrates this moment in the photography's history, Benson noted that they were only one example of the struggle:

“It is important to understand that during the ‘60s and ‘70s many people were working on the challenges of reproducing photographs, and many of them were achieving innovative fine printing . . . I was just one of many working on the tremendously difficult task of replicating silver in ink.”⁷

The physical beauty of a silver gelatin photograph resides in the ability of a light-sensitive emulsion to express the vast tonal range between pure black and pure white. Printing ink on paper, on the other hand, has great difficulty emulating these smooth fields of tone; “shading becomes rough, shadow detail disappears, and delicate highlight values are blown out.”⁸ After a great deal of experimentation, however, the excellent craftsmanship of printers such as Richard Benson would eventually overcome these challenges.

When Friedlander became interested in putting a group of his images into a book, he was sent to the Meriden Gravure Company in Connecticut. In the printing world, letterpress had only recently been replaced by the more efficient process of offset lithography; the new technique

⁷ Ibid., 436.

⁸ Ibid., 436.

had not yet been effectively used to print monochrome photographs. Because *Self Portrait* was not a big job for Meriden, it was assigned to the young Richard Benson, who ignored the protocol of keeping a salesman between himself and the client and thus became friends with the photographer.⁹ In time, the collaboration would be able to produce ink prints that would elegantly transcribe the images in the original silver gelatin.

In offset lithography, halftone printing is the technique of describing images with ink. Benson describes the process of creating a halftone negative for printing:

“In halftone reproduction the picture to be reproduced is photographed through a screen, which breaks up the image into a grid of equally spaced opaque dots that vary in size to emulate tone. The printing ink used is black, but the press has no capability to print black ink in shades of gray; if the halftone dots are small enough, however, the eye sees them as blended together, and the illusion of tone is created.”¹⁰

In this way, continuous tone art could be interpreted into patterns of dots of varying density. The smaller these dots were—based on the number per square inch within the screen—the greater the resolution of the resulting image; they could be small enough so as to be imperceivable to the naked eye. As different as the technique is from the chemical process of creating tone in a light-sensitive emulsion, halftone printing does share with photography its nature of describing all things with equal attention.¹¹ Because of reductions in cost and efficiencies of production, the development of halftone reproduction allowed photographs to be available to a mass market.

In the beginning, halftone printing had some major issues to overcome in the reproduction of photographs—the inability to produce a dense black, a loss of detail in the

⁹ Galassi, “You Have to Change to Stay the Same,” 41.

¹⁰ Benson, “Working with Lee,” 436.

¹¹ Benson, *The Printed Picture*, 220.

shadow areas of the picture, a jump in the transition from dark to light mid-tones, a weakness in the light-gray values, and the inability to accurately portray a white value.¹² The duotone process was created in order to help deal with some of these issues. Printing in duotone is the technique of printing from two weakly-pressed plates—one with black ink, and one with gray ink, made possible with the addition of an extender—instead of one strongly-pressed plate of black ink; these two impressions are made from two different halftone negatives. Though still not absolutely accurate, duotone created much smoother middle and light values and gave more body to the darks.¹³ Through the use of duotone, Benson first attempted to convey Friedlander's photographs in ink, in the photobook *Self Portrait*, which the artist then self published and distributed through his own Haywire Press.

Another industry process in use at the time was photogravure, which implemented the techniques of copper-plate etching for the reproduction of photographs; though it was capable of making beautiful images, it was far more expensive than the lithographic duotone process. Gravure, unlike duotone, had the ability to produce a deep black value on a totally matte surface and furthermore, if properly etched, its full range of tones could be individually adjusted for effectiveness.¹⁴ The production of a deep black on matte paper became a challenge for Benson and Friedlander as they began the creation of Lee's second book, *The American Monument*. Publisher Leslie George Katz of The Eakins Press had related to Benson that he wanted the blacks in the book "to look like the black borders surrounding the designs in the wings of a monarch butterfly," which led Benson to think of trying to print the images on uncoated paper as an emulation of that surface; moreover, the team could not resist the allure of the new style of

¹² Benson, "Working with Lee," 437.

¹³ Benson, *The Printed Picture*, 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

photographs on a matte surface.¹⁵ In the realm of photography reproduction, glossy paper was pervasive. Coated paper had become a standard in the printing industry as the speed of presses had steadily increased. Without a coating, a large area of ink would need high pressure from a plate in order to record smoothly, however the speed of the presses had resulted in the necessity of using only light pressure. The wood pulp used for these glossy papers was highly acidic and the clay coatings usually contained chemical additives, so while coated papers answered the needs of the printing industry, they deteriorated quickly.¹⁶ The invention of offset lithography had, however, allowed for rough paper to be used once again; the process includes the use of an intermediary blanket between the rotary plate cylinder and paper cylinder, and the compressive qualities of the blanket could smoothly transfer the image with lighter pressure.

As printing was initiated for *The American Monument*, Benson and Friedlander were testing the images on both coated and uncoated paper and comparing the two. When viewed simultaneously, the prints on coated paper looked better. They realized, however, that upon viewing them separately, they noticed the rich, matte, butterfly-wing black that they desired on the uncoated paper. This production led Benson to discover that “each must be viewed as a thing in itself, and a judgment made by the impressions it leaves in the mind rather than those on the paper.”¹⁷ Similarly, a viewer would not directly compare the printed ink images to a silver gelatin print because they are separate modes of experiencing a photograph. While the comparison is useful to the printer in the most accurate reproduction of tones, the viewer should not forget that they are different materials and thus different forms of expression.

¹⁵ Benson, “Working with Lee,” 438.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 439.

After *The American Monument*, as well as 1978's *Lee Friedlander: Photographs*—which also utilized duotone printing—Benson used the 1981 project *Flowers and Trees* to experiment with printing in tritone separation. The secondary gray of duotone printing is further divided in the tritone process to a dark gray and a light gray. The light gray layer, instead of being applied as a continuous pattern of dots, is laid down as a solid layer of ink over all areas of the image except the lightest tones; in this way, it creates a great smoothness, thus imparting a photographic quality to the ink. Tritone also has the added benefit of being able to adjust the impressions of both the second and third layers in order to help adjust any discrepancies in printing that may have occurred in the previous pressing of layers; each layer was allowed to dry in between impressions—known as “dry tap”—which allowed for this independent tuning. The spiral binding of *Flowers and Trees* was selected for its efficiency and reduction of costs in conjunction with the more expensive and experimental tritone technique on uncoated paper. The exact superimposition of three images proved difficult, so there are out-of-register sheets scattered throughout.

Commenting on the application of the new technique, Benson wrote, “it is a nutty book, not only in the marvelous freshness with which Lee sticks his camera into bushes and plants but also in the eccentric yet complex grayness of the printing.”¹⁸ Friedlander's early books express this period of experimentation in their variation in printing techniques, scale, and paper and binding choices. During this time—up until *Factory Valleys*,—Benson and Friedlander took a very hand-on approach, actively staying on the press for hours to supervise the details of production. Benson has noted the concurrence of Friedlander's early book output with this experimental time in the

¹⁸ Ibid., 440.

history of photobooks, saying that “Lee’s books are a miniature history of my efforts to solve the puzzle of turning millions of tiny dots into recognizable photographs.”¹⁹

Especially since the development of halftone reproduction, one of the essential questions for photographers has been whether to display their work in a book or on a wall, which is a question of both format and physical materials.²⁰ If the choice is a book, the reproduction of photographs in ink raises questions about what level of variation across the silver and ink prints is acceptable. In a video interview for the magazine *Blind Spot*, Benson fleshed out the thought process behind differences in reproduction and in doing so raises the issue of the perfection of craft in this context:

“If you try to reproduce a picture you can't get it to be the same. If you can't make it the same what you have to do is you've got to figure out what's important about the thing. And you have to figure out the means by which the important thing is made clear in the original object. And you have to figure out what the new means are by which you can make the thing clear in the new context. And if it so happens that the thing that's important is absolute perfection and clarity and detail then maybe you can be interested in traditional craft with that picture. It's almost never the case. It's almost never what art is about. Instead it's about something like gesture or form or tone.”²¹

He makes the case that craft should be utilized to bring about the important aspects of the images, but that its perfection is not an aim in and of itself. In this sense, craft is used as a tool for the art of photography—to make it look its best in whichever material has been chosen for its formatting.

¹⁹ Ibid.,436.

²⁰ Parr, 11.

²¹ Benson, “Blind Spot Conversations 02.”

Craft, which has traditionally been associated with skilled work, or “a form of secret knowledge,” can easily be associated with a photographer like Friedlander who makes all of his gelatin silver prints himself.²² The artist also possesses the work ethic identified with the idea of a craftsman, as evidenced in his self publishing activities, complex filing system, and prolific production of images. In this context, what distinguishes the artist from the craftsmen, though, is the approach in the making of the print. Benson has said, “if you get interested in the making more than in what the thing you're making does then you're becoming a craftsman. And a craftsman is fine but an artist is a different creature.”²³ Although Benson and Friedlander were incredibly invested in the making aspect of ink reproduction, this interest was to allow the photographs to accurately portray their qualities in the book, not just to demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship in printing. In this way, the idea of craft that an artist should have is whatever level of production is necessary to serve the purpose of the artwork.

In addition to his collaboration with Benson, Friedlander also worked with others who had mastered their crafts, including binder George Wieck, designer Katy Homans, and photomechanical expert Thomas Palmer, all of whom contributed their expertise to the production of the artist's photobooks; every element of their creation has a role in contributing to their success.²⁴ The approaches in designing, binding, and printing should each be considered as a way to harmonize with the images in order to create a coherent work. Friedlander particularly experimented with the way that bookbinding materials and techniques could harmonize with his images in collaboration with Wieck—especially in special edition publications—using lavish materials, which has a tradition in the *livre d'artiste*, and testing out a variety of formats for his

²² Metcalf, 14.

²³ Benson, “Richard Benson.”

²⁴ Parr, 7.

photobooks. In addition to books, Friedlander was also drawn to the boxed portfolio format, which exists in between the photobook and the gallery print.²⁵ Unfortunately, Friedlander's collaborations and experimentations with binder George Wieck ended with the death of the binder in 1994; the artist has focused on trade publications instead of special editions ever since.²⁶

Photobooks contain a collection of images taken by a photographer over some period of time. In an interview with photographer John Paul Caponigro, Friedlander described his bodies of work as “just something that has accumulated, like dust. It looks like I have ideas because I do books that are all on the same subject.”²⁷ This sense of accumulation relates to both the “snapshot” practices of photographers and amateurs as well as the pervasive habit of humans to gradually acquire things throughout their lives. When explaining the 1967 New Documents exhibition featuring Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand, MoMA's Director of Photography John Szarkowski wrote that the photographers' aim was to know life, and that “the commonplace is really worth looking at.” Friedlander was both interested in the vernacular, and expressing his mode of working as a commonplace technique. This *modus operandi* can be seen as coming out of the stream-of-consciousness style—of Beat literature, bebop jazz, and action painting—in existence during the early phase of Friedlander's career. Parr notes how the book is appropriate for this quality in photography:

“The stream-of-consciousness style was related to an era and, as we have seen, gradually transformed itself at the end of the 1960s into the personal documentary or snapshot mode.

Its influence, however, remains, for it is related to a fundamental impulse in photography—to

²⁵ Smith, 18.

²⁶ Azim, 445.

²⁷ Friedlander, 35.

make a visual diary of one's life. . . . Importantly, this was a style whose informality was far better suited to the book form than to a display of individual prints on a wall."²⁸

Friedlander's prolific accumulations makes quantity part of quality, with numerous images constituting one artwork.²⁹ From the outset of the creation of photobooks, photography has been "a methodology for gathering information, and a visual medium with a clear narrative imperative."³⁰ Collections of images—that necessarily rely on each other for full understanding—are often considered a secondary practice of the photographer, but in reality, the act of placing images within the pages of a book or album has been a fundamental practice in its history.³¹

Friedlander's work relates to the literary world not only in its connection to the stream-of-consciousness style, but also in that a photobook presents a narrative, with a seriality that comes from placing images on connected pages. Curator of photography at Princeton University Art Museum, Joel Smith, opined that throughout his collections of photographs, "Friedlander's theme—realizable, like Walt Whitman's, only by means of lists and cycles—is the irreducibility of the world to an isolated statement."³² The concept of looking at Friedlander's photobooks as "lists and cycles" ties into general ideas about how one engages with a book—or any collection of words or images—utilizing both linear and random reading. While front-to-back reading will generally suffice for literary text, Clive Phillpot—director of MoMA's library in the '70s—notes that random reading may be necessary for other forms of writing: "Simple linear reading is less effective though, in prizing apart a poem, which might be regarded as a form of distilled prose,

²⁸ Parr, 233.

²⁹ Galassi, "You Have to Change to Stay the Same," 15.

³⁰ Parr, 10.

³¹ Smith, 9-10.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

but perhaps a different species of word building altogether.”³³ Forming an understanding of a gathering of images in a photobook is similarly dependent on random reading; the photographs have a specific and intentional order, but returning to portions after the linear reading of sections or the whole will result in a new, and perhaps necessary, set of connections. Phillpot expounds on this process:

“The second reading, incorporating as it will foreknowledge of the text, is an extremely different activity than the first when allusions, echoes, or retrospective changes of meaning, cannot be fully appreciated.”³⁴

Looking at a collection of images and/or words in this way requires the involvement of memory, as one must make connections across the work.³⁵ Furthermore, the reading of a photobook becomes even more complex when considering the physical elements of the book. This notion of “expanded reading” results in a heightened awareness of the material physicality of the book as an object and how that affects the viewing experience of the images within.³⁶ A reading of the material components is especially relevant to Friedlander’s early photobooks as their binding and printing are such an important part of their history of experimentation.

In its ability to protect a light-sensitive medium from deterioration, the book can be considered an ideal format for photographs, as it keeps the images within the confines of its covers when not being viewed. This protective aspect, however, as well as the autonomous nature of a photobook as an object, can be destroyed when images are taken out of books in order to be hung on walls. An awareness of the photobook as a important format—at the very least on equal

³³ Phillpot, 5.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

footing with the gallery print—is necessary for a deeper expression of the medium. In addition to the manner in which they can offer a different viewing experience of a body of photographs, the photobook is a way for photographic images to continue to propagate through time. In *The Photobook, A History*, Martin Parr writes:

“[Photobooks] can be published, sink with hardly a trace, become cult items, and appear in book dealers’ catalogues, to be rediscovered and possibly reprinted. Unlike exhibitions, they are always around, out there somewhere, convenient and portable expositions of a photographer’s work, with the potential for rediscovery, revival and revivification at any time.”³⁷

As the practice of photography moves into the digital age, fixed sequences of images will in some cases be replaced with a virtual collection, and the nature of seriality and unity within a body of work will need to be re-negotiated. Ironically, the digital world, while killing off the practice of darkroom photography, is simultaneously capable of making the most beautiful reproductions of photographs in ink. When asked to speak on the future of the printed photograph, Richard Benson conjectured:

“I don’t think the printed photograph is ever going to go away. . . I think it’s probably going to become a minor aspect of the medium. You know, as technology rolls along all the mediums that use it—whether it’s making cars or highways or airplanes or photography or whatever—all practices that use technology ride on the front of the wave of technological change, and the thing that’s socially viable is on the front of that wave, and I think for decades the photographic print was there and it started to fade when it got transferred into magazines and books and ink replicas started to spread around everywhere. I think the front

³⁷ Parr, 11.

of that wave is going to be electronic imagery—whether it’s video or still—and the print is going to be this thing rolling off to the side like all the other semi-dead technologies; we’re going to love it and keep doing it, but it’s going to become minor.”³⁸

Perhaps as the rise of the digital image overtakes the printed photograph, it will create an awareness of the photobook as an important and distinct mode of art-making within the realm of photography. Within the history of the photobook, Lee Friedlander’s photobooks of the ‘70s and ‘80s exemplify a revolution in printing and his photographic output continues to create objects that invite the viewer to consider how a photobook as an object renders meaning for a body of images.

Lee Friedlander’s photobooks to date, as well as some examples of the progression of duotone and tritone printing, can currently be viewed in the exhibition “Lee Friedlander: The Printed Picture,” at the Pratt Institute’s Brooklyn campus library, which will be on display until October 6, 2014.

³⁸ Benson, “Blind Spot Conversations 02.”

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Published in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the exhibition, Arbus Friedlander Winogrand features full-page reproductions of the 94 photographs included in the exhibition, along with Szarkowski's original wall text, press release, installation views and an abundance of archival material. Essays by curator Sarah Hermanson Meister and critic Max Kozloff, who originally reviewed the exhibition for The Nation in 1967, critically situate the exhibition and its reception, and examine its lasting influence on the field of photography. First Arbus then Friedlander and lastly Winogrand. Arbus's section to me is the strongest and has a good proportion of my favorite works by her. Winogrand's section has "World's Fair" but misses on some of his great later works. The book ends on more details of the show. I'd highly recommend this book as an introduction to all three artists and an important period in photography. Garry Winogrand (14 January 1928 – 19 March 1984) was an American street photographer, known for his portrayal of U.S. life and its social issues, in the mid-20th century. Photography curator, historian, and critic John Szarkowski called Winogrand the central photographer of his generation. He received three Guggenheim Fellowships to work on personal projects, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and published four books during his lifetime. He was one of three photographers featured in Lee Friedlander's *Photographer*. Arbelos. Garry Winogrand: All Things are Photographable. January 3, 2019. THIS WEEK in Palm Springs and Seattle - and everywhere on iTunes! <https://www.thestranger.com/~/garry-winogrands-gorgeous-stra> American street photographer Garry Winogrand didn't consider himself to be an artist—at least, not at the beginning of his career. You Can't Fake Intellectual Property Law. Friedland Vining is a top intellectual property law firm in South Florida. We advise, negotiate and execute transactions involving patents, trademarks, copyrights, trade secrets and domain names and guide clients on how to obtain, protect, commercialize and transfer intellectual property rights. David Friedland. David's practice encompasses all aspects of intellectual property, including domestic and international acquisition and enforcement matters involving trademarks, patents, copyrights, trade secrets, and related rights.