

Bindings, Boundaries and Cuts: Relating Agency and Ontology in Photobook Encounters

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Abstract

The artwork and commodity known as a ‘photobook’ is gaining visibility as an object of creative practice and cultural economy. It has generally been studied within photographic histories. This thesis builds alternative ontologies of the photobook as an experiential, social artefact using a unique methodological assemblage that responds to the object’s hybrid nature.

The enquiry posits that encounters with photobooks are “material-discursive configurations” of matter, materiality, meaning and context, in which the photobook-object is actualised in relation to its surroundings and the reader’s sensations and interpretations. The study foregrounds situated moments of “encounter” between humans and photobooks, which are simultaneously texts, images, actants and phenomena, to question what roles photobooks perform in different circumstances – what they *do*. The research identifies photobook agencies including: affecting aesthetic art experiences, mediating social and economic relations, and pushing back against established epistemic regimes.

The study of this messy, boundary object employs counter-hegemonic techniques such as autoethnography alongside ethnographic data to uncover relational insight into photobook encounters, analysed through a combined lens of Actor-Network Theory, New Materialism and Phenomenology. The iterative methodology reveals the research process’ own agency, advancing the thesis’ argument that more-than-human entities co-produce diverse knowledges. This original theoretical position produces a multi-faceted analysis of an under-researched artistic medium, form and genre, which is novel for studies of photographic history and culture, as well as interdisciplinary object studies.

Through exploring the complexities of a seemingly quotidian book-shaped thing in wide-ranging personal and institutional encounters, the study fosters a profound, felt awareness of relationalities between humans and non-humans. This alternative approach shows how encounters with art objects present new, pluralistic ways of knowing that disrupt habitual schematic modes of cutting or limiting our experiences of phenomena and things, with meaningful consequences for rethinking our modes of acting, consuming, feeling and being in the world.