

Prolific photographer, collector, and author Martin Parr expands his definitive account of an eye-popping genre.

BY VINCE ALETTI

Book Keeping

Parr, here in a 1999 self-portrait, is an insatiable connoisseur of photobooks like the 1929 *Here Comes the New Photographer!* (top) and Jean-Philippe Charbonnier's *The Roads of Life*, 1957.



THE MORE YOU know," Martin Parr laments, "the more you realize how much you don't know." Every serious collector has felt this at one time or another—it's the flip side of "The more you get, the more you want." But the British photographer isn't discouraged, only determined. Best known for his witty color-saturated pictures of his countrymen at leisure, he also has a reputation as an insatiable and discerning collector of photography books. His trove—which he underestimates at some 7,000 volumes, all at his home in Bristol—goes back to an 1886 oddity called *Professional Criminals of America* by Thomas Byrnes, chief of the New York City Detective Bureau, and courses through the medium's entire history.

Over an ersatz English brunch in Manhattan's East Village, Parr, whose professorial reserve is constantly undermined by a readiness to be either riled or amused, talks about how his extensive holdings were the inspiration for *The Photobook: A History, Volume I*, a collaboration with curator and critic Gerry Badger published by Phaidon in 2004. They are just putting the finishing touches on a second volume, due out in September. It includes chapters on photojournalism; artists' books; publications from China, Israel, and South America; and what Parr calls "company books," titles commissioned by businesses for corporate publicity. Photographers from Man Ray and

A spread from Giulia Pirelli and Carlo Orsi's *Milan*, 1965. Right: William Klein's *Life Is Good and Good for You in New York: Trance Witness Revels*, 1956.

Walker Evans to Lee Friedlander and Parr himself have done work for such books ("There's nobody who hasn't," Parr insists). But because they were never sold commercially or seen by the public, these works are among the rarest in his collection.

Where to Buy Photobooks

DASHWOOD BOOKS
33 Bond St., New York;
212-387-8520; www.dashwoodbooks.com

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY
5 & 8 Great Newport St.,
London; 44-207/831-1772;
www.photonet.org.uk

LA CHAMBRE CLAIRE
14 Rue St. Sulpice, Paris;
33-1/46-34-04-31;
www.chambreclaire.com

LIBRAIRIE 213
58 Rue Charlot, Paris;
33-1/43-22-83-23;
www.galerie213.com

MARKUS SCHADEN
10 Burgmuer, Cologne,
Germany; 49-221/925-
2667; www.schaden.com

The two-part survey catches a cresting wave of interest in photobooks both as historical markers of a medium whose market is at a fever pitch and as artworks in their own right. Milestones such as *The Decisive Moment* (1952) by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958) regularly show up at auction alongside rare vintage prints and sometimes fetch equally staggering prices. A copy of Doris Ulmann's 1933 book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, a romanticized photo-essay on black plantation workers in South Carolina, sold for \$57,600 at Sotheby's in 2004.

Parr, who is 54, has published three dozen books of his own. Most are collections of the rudely intrusive social satire that has become his trademark, showcased in his 2005 *Fashion Magazine*, a send-up of couture consumerism that includes close-ups of designer jewels on sliced salami and a Gucci bra dangling from a clothesline in Dakar, Senegal. Parr says he

knew he wanted to be a photographer from the age of 13. But it wasn't until he was a student at Manchester Polytechnic in 1971 that he bought his first photobook, a copy of *The Americans*, for \$25. (Today a first edition in excellent condition can sell for more than \$3,000.) Frank's dark, anxious images

Size, shape, typeface, paper stock, printing process, and image sequence are all crucial to a book's impact.

of midcentury America made an indelible imprint.

In his preface to the first volume of *The Photobook*, Parr writes that *The Americans* "opened my eyes to the true potential of photography; it showed me that the medium can interpret feelings as well as describing places. But it also alerted me to the way in

which a well-made book can bring a group of photographs to life. 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."

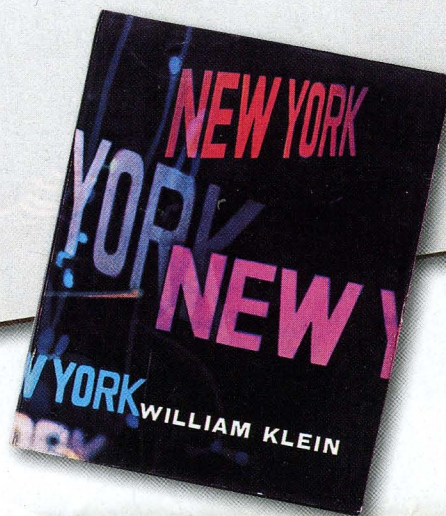
Of course, producing a book with that kind of impact is a sophisticated, subtle achievement. While *The Americans* was radical for the time, its design was fairly conventional: a

sequence of similar-size pictures, one to a spread. "In the classic mold" is how Parr describes it, as opposed to the eccentric, personal, and precedent-setting books he's come to value most.

Because photographs were exhibited only rarely until the fifties and didn't really find a place in galleries until the eighties, for a long time books were primarily how photographers got their work seen. (Though magazines were another sort of outlet, they involved considerably more compromise.) Many photographers were happy with just

a straightforward collection of their pictures; others wanted something more idiosyncratic and artful—an extension of their creative vision.

Many of the most innovative books were designed by the photographers themselves. One of these, William Klein's *Life Is Good and Good for You in New York: Trance Witness*





Henri Cartier-Bresson's 1952 book *The Decisive Moment*, featuring one of his most famous images

Revels (1956), is now a cornerstone of every major modern photobook library. Parr refers to it as "the most influential photobook of the twentieth century." It spawned a slew of city-themed books in the sixties, and Klein's stream-of-consciousness style and grainy black-and-white prints were widely imitated.

Initiated by photographers themselves, these "project books," as Parr calls them, are the prime focus of both his collection and of *The Photobook*. (His library contains most of the nearly 500 titles included in the two volumes.) Unlike retrospective catalogues, project books are usually conceived as showcases for a particular body of work. Their size, shape, typeface, paper stock, printing process, and image sequence are all crucial to their impact.

Some of Parr's favorite books were bought during his travels. "A lot of the great books published in Europe don't even get to the United States," he says. Those from other parts of the world are even rarer. He still raves about the "revelation" of a 1991 trip to Japan, where adventurous books created in the sixties by Eikoh Hosoe,

Kikuji Kawada, Daido Moriyama, and Shomei Tomatsu changed the course of his collection. Kawada's *The Map* and Hosoe's *Kamaitachi* are art objects, with elaborate slipcases, decorated covers, gatefolds, and such astonishing attention to detail that just the act of turning the page becomes a theatrical event.

"The number of good books coming out of Japan continues to amaze me," Parr remarks. "I find things from the sixties and seventies that I've never heard of before. And why not? Japan, the most profound book-making country after the war, was entirely overlooked by America and Europe until recently. It just beggars belief, and it highlights how subjective the history of photography has been." Since so much of that history is contained in photobooks, Parr's private collection and his two-volume survey are significant steps in opening up the canon.

Still, he hasn't forgotten the pleasure that led him to collecting. The books that he brings back from far-flung places satisfy a basic craving for images, especially those that are vernacular, commercial, even deeply ordinary.

Parr's Picks

Never one to bore with the familiar or conventional, Parr didn't hesitate to tap these four titles for photobook history.

FACT BY SOPHIE RISTELHUEBER
(EDITIONS HAZAN, 1992)

This hard-to-find book of aerial photos documents the destruction of the landscape during the first Gulf War. "Looking down, you get these patterns of tractors and tanks, wrecked machines on the ground—no people whatsoever," Parr says. He describes the small, black-edged volume as "almost biblical, like a hymnal. It's very radical, intense, and brilliant. The first time I saw it, I knew it would be important. I bought six copies."

USEFUL PHOTOGRAPHY #002 (ARTIMO, 2002)

A compilation of digital photographs showing items for sale on eBay (at right), this is the second in a series overseen by Erik Kessels, head of a Dutch ad agency and "one of the brightest people in photography," according to Parr. "I was thinking of *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel [the 1977 book of images from government and corporate

archives], and this is the contemporary equivalent. It's vernacular photography at its best—the most bizarre, wonderful, incredible set of images of objects that you don't have any context for."

THE BANQUET BY NOBUYOSHI ARAKI
(MAGAZINE HOUSE, 1993)

"This book [left] was very influential for me. It's an example of how I can steal an idea and make it my own," Parr jokes. "Araki is an amazing bookmaker—he's done more than three hundred."

At the time Araki began this project, Parr explains, "he was photographing food in color. When he learned his wife was dying, he started shooting the food she prepared for him in black and white. He deals with her death indirectly, and it's an amazing mixture of metaphor and meaning."

TEMPORARY DISCOMFORT: CHAPTER I-V
BY JULES SPINATSCH (LARS MULLER PUBLISHERS, 2005)

With its pictures of five cities—Davos, Genoa, New York, Evian, and Geneva—under lockdown for global economic summit meetings, this volume won the book award at the 2005 Rencontres d'Arles, the annual photo festival in France. "Spinatsch photographs from the fringes of big events like the G8 and focuses entirely on the security forces," Parr explains. "The printing, the design, and the ambition work very well. It possesses all the elements so many books lack: rigor, discipline, the correct production values. It's one of the most coherent and challenging books of the past decade."

Parr, who is putting out two books of his own this year—*Mexico* and *Parking Spaces*, both published by Chris Boot in London—is also a relentless promoter of other photographers' efforts. He urges anyone who

will listen to pick up new titles before they go out of print. "Many of the greatest books that are now very expensive were remaindered before they became collectible," he says, stuffing another hefty volume into his bag. ■