

Talking Books

Erik van der Weijde in Conversation with ...

Brad Feuerhelm

Brad Feuerhelm's upcoming book with MACK bears the striking title *Dein Kampf*. His passionate writing on photography, with his strong opinions and his ongoing thirst for finding the most interesting images that survived history, made me into a fan since I first discovered this most curious name online. Some of the interests and opinions we share might be due to our identical age that seems to carry our (photographical) midlife crisis. Brad is a photography collector, dealer, artist, curator, and writer. He is also the editor-in-chief of *American Suburb X* (ASX), currently the main output for his writing.

EvdW There aren't many writers working in the photobook field. Photobooks are maybe still a niche, but writing about them is even more so. How come you choose to write about the photobook? Where does your fascination (and training) come from?

BF I started collecting photography books in 1997 or so, when I was in art school, and was turned off the medium somewhere around the time when Martin Parr and Gerry Badger made collecting an expensive habit. It kind of diminished the interest for me. I had the Andrew Roth book before theirs and thought that was nice, but when it became the empire of Parr and Badger and the prices escalated, it was a major turnoff. I realize they have done a great thing in some ways by turning people onto the medium. That being said, they have also let loose a lot of poor work on the world by championing it unduly in book form.

By trade, I am not a writer, nor do I consider myself one. I retain poor syntax and even poorer grammar. I choose to write on books when I get excited by them. It's almost as if I have to purge their effect on me, to vomit their hold on me back into words. That goes both ways—if I hate something, it has the same effect. My feeling is that since most of what I do is unpaid review-wise, the "gift" of the object/photobook is more interesting as a form to review than, say, an exhibition which is simply unpaid public relations. On a personal level, I also think that my own work is best exemplified in book format. I play drums and think of sequencing and editing as a rhythm in which images can correlate in their layout as frequency. You can see this in my forthcoming book in particular.

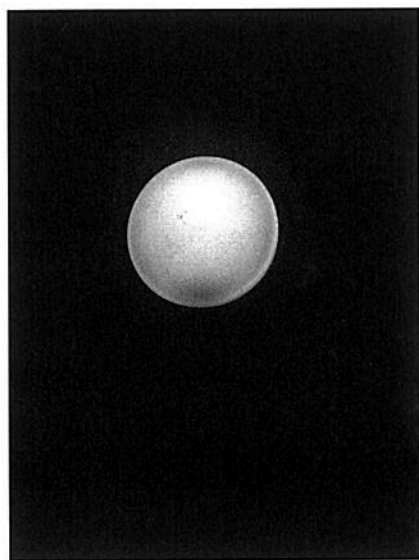
EvdW I am curious about your upcoming book. I imagine it will be a bold statement, just like your writing is. The title, *Dein Kampf*, sparked my curiosity for sure. When I read your pieces on any photobook, I always feel your passion or hate, which I really appreciate. I always wonder in what kind of state you write those pieces. Is it immediately after you see a new book? Or does it take a few days? And does the anger, or excitement, grow once you start writing?

BF When I started writing bits and pieces, I couldn't concentrate on the material without sort of living inside the images in front of me. I am not by nature a writer, and finding words becomes more of a vomit-oriented affair. It's kind

of a channeling for me. I suppose it works this way for many people, but I really can't get into a book or body of work without getting into a pseudo-rapturous state. I have to be excited either way. It happens when I hate something as well, but I really do not want to waste time unless I feel strongly about something. Mediocrity is a tragedy. So for the books that I really love, like Raymond Meeks's last book (*Halfstory Halflife*, 2018), for example, I have to inhabit the frame. I have to place myself, right or wrong, in that world to get the words to bubble up, and I usually have to be alone or away from people to do it while listening to reallllly loud music. If I am at a loss, then I sometimes turn on two YouTube channels on very random things, generally documentary projects, and let the cascade of words

work, generally alone and with music. The headspace I need for doing that kind of work is more about the notion of being alone and wandering: I was also reflecting on the political anxiety of our times and my pessimistic place in it.

I also have a loose idea about how photographic influence can work like a sieve. I collect images from two time frames almost specifically right now, which means that is what is influencing my patterns and shooting and looking. The postwar German photograph and the American photographic postcard from 1900 to 1939 have a cold similarity, and in these two areas I am channeling a bit of my optical energy and its retinal muscle memory, building an obtuse anachronistic memory palace one image at a time with what is in front of me, enforcing my reference library



Spread from: Brad Feuerhelm, *Dein Kampf*, forthcoming (autumn 2019), n.p.

overlap until I pull something out, usually one phrase, and I run with it. For me, the writing cannot be academic or footnoted. In my mind, that is anemic, elitist, and without general function for normal people, though a great many people I admire use this format. If we keep citing other people, what original thoughts do we actually have as individuals? The only relationship we can have with images is the same that we have with the world, one to one. There is nothing we can be told to experience that is "true," not even from the author's position and especially not with photography of all pursuits.

EvdW When you say that you "have to inhabit the frame," do you also do that in your own photography? Could you say something about the working process that you followed for your upcoming book *Dein Kampf*? And what do you do to avoid the quicksand trap of photography: mediocrity?

BF Strangely, not entirely. It's different, but there are similar rituals involved. That being said, *Dein Kampf* was influenced by postwar German photography and also by leading a workshop with John Gossage. The work was made in Berlin over three days before the workshop started and was extremely intense. I tend to walk a site/city for hours on end when making

through a particular visual indoctrination. With *Dein Kampf*, I was photographing as I walked Berlin, but the topics involved—the denial of ideology, anxiety, city, and historic trauma, the disavowal of cyclical political behavior, and the disbelief that after decades of nonsensical political discourse we actually end up in the same conversation—certainly informed some of the images that I was making of banks, insurance companies, but also the Berlin Wall and some of the Nazi execution grounds.

EvdW This work will be published by the quality label MACK, right? I have the feeling that the photobook publishing landscape has been changing a bit again recently. Something's happening to the bubble... How do you see the current market/community, from a bird's-eye view?

BF Interesting question! The book will be published with MACK, yes. The way I see it is that we have had a nice little boom in publishing from about 2010 to about 2017, where you can see a bit of a wobble of interest wane and overproduction hitting its apex. There seems to be room for the great publishers right now, such as MACK, SPBH, ROMA, Skinnerbook, Éditions Xavier Barral, Pierre von Kleist, APE, and Chose Commune, to name a few. There are a few more and some exemplary self-published projects like

Stephen Gill's Nobody Books and SUN in New York, but in large what I think is happening is that the "de Middel effect" is over. This is the notion that producing a decent book or fetishized photobook can lead to a career in the art world. That is simply not the case and never was, and I think that the wave of mediocrity we have seen over the last few years is exemplary of this false notion that making a photobook and then having Parr get his picture taken with it will open more gilded doors. That is over and it never really existed.

My feeling is also that people/collectors have developed better taste and realize that there is a load of bollocks being produced by people who have very little interest in studying the format of how a book is sequenced, edited, produced, and marketed. We are seeing the rotten fruit drop to the ground now that the wind has picked up. There is still room for great books to be made and certainly a wider market for publishers like MACK, Skinnerbook, and perhaps APE as they seem to cross genres and work pretty hard to get into fairs and bookshops internationally—a key component that most publishers miss after the ink dries.

EvdW I also believe that the photobook market, as a whole, has done a pretty good job for the photobook-as-artistic-output, mainly through fairs. The bubble it created at the same time drew in a large amount of amateurism as well, attracted by a seemingly easy way into career-making. Where do you think lie the strengths of the photobook as a format? And have you seen a shift in strengths comparing pre- and post-2010? What would be your considerations as a collector, consumer, as opposed to those of a maker?

BF I think that prior to 2010, with the availability of cheaper (and yet to get cheaper) printing allowed photographers who had earnest projects that they wanted developed to do so. This meant that the whimsy of it had yet to appear—Google projects, archive projects, and the never-ending stream of really poorly thought out documentary projects were still in their semi-proliferate infancy. The photobook as a medium is open to possibility, but at its core the function should serve as a body of work between two covers no matter how it is orchestrated within. It should be ultimately considered and it certainly should NOT be intertwined with how an artist sees the exhibition of their material before it is published. That sounds implicit, but alas, we have many artists still using the book as the footnote to get to the exhibition, and it shows in the book being generally the worse for wear. This is the place of the poor amateur.

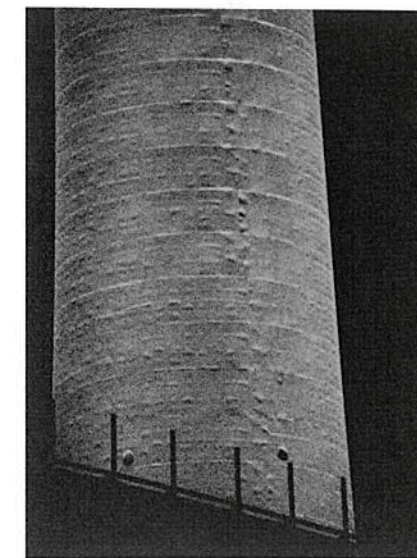


Brad Feuerhelm:
Dein Kampf.

With an introduction by the artist and contributions by Christy Lang and Eugene Thacker (eng.).

MACK, London 2019 (forthcoming).
124 pages, 21.5 x 28 cm, numerous b/w illustrations.

€ 35,- / £ 30,- / ISBN 978-1-912339-58-7



Spread from: Brad Feuerhelm, *Dein Kampf*, forthcoming (autumn 2019), n.p.

When I look at a book, I look for its overall idea—and most importantly, before design, I look at the sequence and the edit and how images relate to one another throughout the whole of the book and where the necessary breaks or changes are in the tempo of it as a whole. It's really easy to get caught in "couplets"—two images or a small run of images that run together—which only serve to "en-block" sections of a book, rendering the whole as unpalatable in the format. Why choose the book if you do not understand its mechanics? As an enthusiast, it is clear to me how there is a difference between artists using the book format as an actual format versus an artist using the book to squeeze a few ideas between two covers. There is very strong work being made now, but I think it's time for us to reevaluate the reasons a book is chosen.

EvdW Personally, to keep up to date with many of these reasons, I try to read *American Suburb X* as much as possible. I believe that the platform has an aversion to mediocrity, amateurism, political correctness, and bullshit, resulting in an ongoing showcase for the gems within visual culture. In a way, platforms like these function as a beacon for quality. Much more even than the market, which is, understandably but unfortunately, more often short-term driven. How would you position ASX and what are your core values within this position?

BF The position we have with ASX is that we do not have to pretend to be something outside of middle brow. We have a general focus on work that is fresh but stable, and we differ in that we do not have to curb our language or outrage if we really feel the need. We do not make any money from the site, so the general idea is more "whatever goes" as we are not dependent on having to follow the script for pay. This lets us move forward in plainspeak, even if we use language that is bordering on invective, as was the case with an article on Antoine d'Agata or Erik Kessels.

My own position about writing on photography is really that I cannot tell you things you need to know. Photography is really a subjective analysis for me, and though I could go and fill the endnotes with citations or use superfluous academic quotations, I do not want to be in the position to enforce meaning on someone else, nor do I feel my position is one that mandates a respect based on the condition of "critic." We're

all swimming against the high tide of twenty-first-century problems together, so to pretend that I have insight over how something makes you feel or to draw comparisons would be to belittle the reader. I don't think there is another platform like ours that continues to declare its hand this way. I hope that it excites people to think about art and photography in the same way that they consider music or whatever other pursuits they get up to in the world. The minute the door of knowledge is held open for only one group of elite/educated people is the minute the town hall should be burnt to the ground.

Brad Feuerhelm (born 1977, US) is an artist, writer and collector of photography. He has published several books on his work and has written for different magazines both in print and online. In 2012, he published his first book with Self Publish Be Happy (Coll. MOMA, NY) and has since published several more books. He is the Managing Editor and Partner for *American Suburb X*.

Erik van der Weijde (born 1977) is a Dutch artist whose work consists of (self-)published books and photographic series. Currently, he is also teaching at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam (NL).