

Smell the ink and drift away

Instagram is like frozen pizza, exhibitions are noisy - but a photobook is an escape from an obnoxiously digital world.
By **Teju Cole**

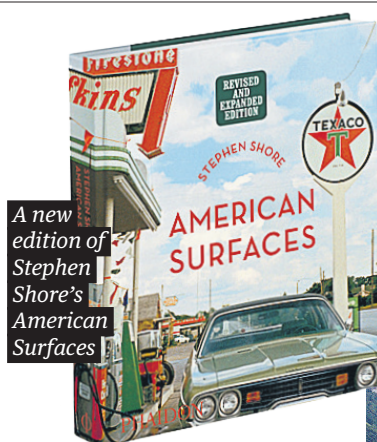
Where can one find temporary help in this hectic world? People go on retreats, join religions, cushion themselves in headphones or lose themselves in novels. We counter the rush-hour stampede with a walk in the park, and against the public squall of political debate we set the private consolation of poetry. In an age of mayhem, everyone needs ballast and, for most people, I would guess, that ballast is made of several different things. Near the top of my personal list: photobooks. I take a photobook off the shelf and spend 20 or 30 minutes with it, and this brief immersion provisionally repairs the world.

It might be a book I've already looked at many times - which is even better. I'm not talking about simply looking at photographs. There are photos everywhere, and most of them are like empty calories. Many photos, even good ones, tend simply to show you what something looks like. But if you sequence several of them, in a book, say, or in an exhibition, you see not only what something looks like but how someone looks. A sequence of photographs testifies to a photographer's visual thinking, a way of seeing revealed through choices of colour, subject, scale and perspective. The photographs encountered in an exhibition might be beautiful new prints or vintage ones imbued with the aura of originality. But there are disadvantages to exhibitions: they can be noisy and crowded, open

during inconvenient hours and have closing dates. With a book, though, the images and the photographer's arrangement of them are yours for all time.

The photobook was born, by one account, when Anna Atkins made an album of her cyanotype studies of British algae in 1843. Henry Fox Talbot began to issue *The Pencil of Nature*, with tipped-in calotype images, the following year. It did not take other photographers long to seize on commercially distributing their photography in book form. The middle of the 20th century saw the publications of Henri Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* (1952) and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958), and those two books, in strikingly different ways, became the looming influence against which almost all subsequent photobooks were measured. Even today, ask photographers what sent them down their chosen path and one or both of those books is likely to be mentioned as exemplars. The strength of the individual pictures is central to the success of a photobook (*The Americans*, like *The Decisive Moment*, is almost nothing but winners), but there are photographers of genius who have never made a truly great photobook; at best, they have made books of their great photos, which is a different matter.

What makes a photobook great is how well it combines a large number of variables: the paper; print quality; stitching and binding; the weight, colour and texture of the cover; the design and layout of the interior; the size and colour balance of the images; the decision to use gatefolds or to print across the gutter; the choice to include or exclude text and, if so, how much of it, where in the

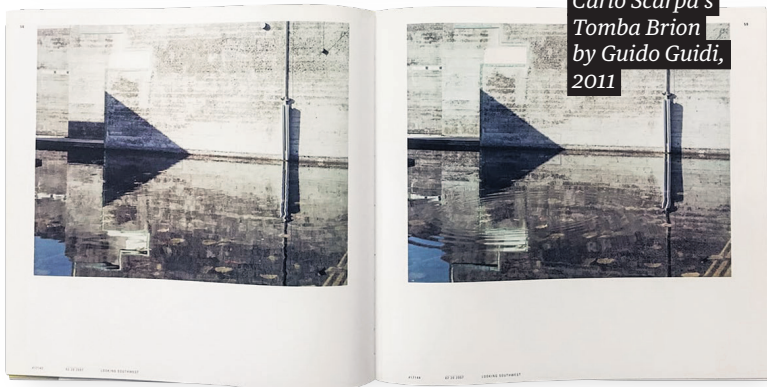


A new edition of Stephen Shore's *American Surfaces*



Here, and right: Teju Cole's new book of his photographs, *Fernweh*

The Americans by Robert Frank, 1958



Carlo Scarpa's *Tomba Brion* by Guido Guidi, 2011

book, and in what font; the trim size and left of the book; even the smell of the ink! Every great photobook is a granary of decisions, an invitation into the realm of the senses. If a poem is great, I'm indifferent to the design choices made for the book in which it is published, unless the design is particularly atrocious. But I can tell whether a photobook has been meticulously made, or is merely a pile of pictures printed one after another. Truth be told, not all photographs in a photobook need to be great, and the real artists of

the form know how to aerate their stupendous images with less forceful transitional ones.

But what a joy it is when all of those decisions seem right, when the print quality is meticulous, when a book crying out for matte paper is made with matte paper, when the colour profile favours magenta over yellow, or cyan over magenta, depending on what the pictures need. The experience becomes multidimensional, and the memory of the work becomes idiosyncratically specific. I think not

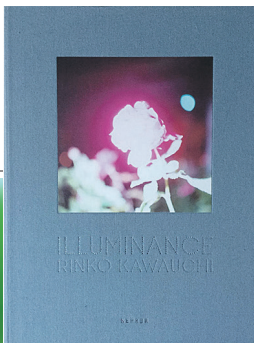
only of certain photographers' styles, but also of the tactile and sensory trace of their books. The luxuriously uncut double pages of Rinko Kawauchi's *Illuminance* are as much a thrill to the hands as her glimmering images are to the eye. Liz Johnson Artur's self-titled book has a flawless combination of colour images with those in black and white, the better to convey the effervescent generosity of her vision. The stippled deep purple cover of Gueorgui Pinkhassov's *Sightwalk* is a braille-like prophecy of the delirious scatter of light within. These qualities are more enduring than whether a project is "important" or not. Investigative reports are important, but in our intimate moments it is sensibility that best restores us to our human selves. This is not to downplay the ethical dimension of photography, but to suggest that the ethical flourishes best when the formal conditions are in place to protect it.

Of all the elements that make a photobook truly special, the most important is the order of the images. Look at this, the photographer says, then look at this, then look at this

Ravens by Masahisa Fukase, 1986, reissued 2017



Illuminance
by Rinko
Kawauchi,
2011



one. All books are chronological, but the feeling of being guided, of being simultaneously surprised and satisfied, is particularly intense in photobooks. I think of Masahisa Fukase's legendary Ravens (1986), which is largely about the titular birds. It is gloomy, making great use of blur and nocturnal shooting, with a black and white palette, and set entirely in Japan. I thought about Ravens a lot when I was preparing Fernweh, though my book is superficially very different: set in the Swiss landscape, shot mostly in clear bright colour in summer weather. I was aided by the way Fukase looked and looked again at the ravens, finding remarkable new ways to think about those unsettling birds. In one magical sequence, an image of a congress of ravens in the snow is followed by one of a single wing against a white field, followed by a photo of numerous corvid footprints on a lightly snowy surface, the footprints startlingly like the shapes of the birds themselves. And so, black on white was followed by black on white - a virtuoso display of analogical thinking. This is language without words. Elsewhere, among many pictures of ravens, a sinister-looking cat suddenly appears and then a nude sex worker, and later an almost abstract closeup of a plane in flight. The trust in variation is wonderful. I tried to keep that trust in mind in making Fernweh.

In a world of deafening images, the quiet consolations of photobooks doom them to a small, and sometimes tiny, audience.

They are expensive to make and rarely recoup their costs. In this way, they are a quixotic affront to the calculations of the market. The evidence of a few bestsellers notwithstanding, the most common fate of photobooks is oblivion. But it is precisely this labour-intensive and financially unsound character that allows them to sit patiently on our shelves like oracles. Then one day, someone takes one of them off the shelf and is mesmerised by the silent and unanticipated intensity. (The experience of reading a novel, by contrast, is not so silent, for the reader is accompanied by the unvoiced chatter of the text.)

Time with a photobook is a wander off the beaten path, and hardly a day goes by that I don't reach for one. This enjoyment cannot be dispatched with a "like" button. The photobook won't send you ads based on how long you linger on a given page. It doesn't track you (no one knows, for sure, how many times I have looked at Guido Guidi's Tomba Brion). It is resistant to gossip and allergic to snark. Sitting with it, you have to sit with yourself: this is a private experience in a time when those are becoming alarmingly rare, an act of analogue rebellion in an obnoxiously digital world. Sure, one could look at a sequence of pictures on a digital device, but to do so would be to indulge a poor facsimile like frozen pizza, instant coffee, or artificial flowers.

The book, the actual book, is the thing. From your library or from someone else's, you might pick up Dayanita Singh's Museum of Chance or Stephen Shore's American Surfaces, Rebecca Norris Webb's My Dakota or Gilles Peress's Telex: Iran. The book you choose might be by a little-known photographer; it might have been printed by a small press or a large publishing house; it might be a limited edition, an out-of-print classic or a surprising newcomer. But now you're holding it, and what it promises is relief: the outside world falls away, the eye scans the image, you sense the paper on your fingertips, you feel the optical information spreading into your brain, you hear the sound of the turning page, you become aware of your own calm breath.

Fernweh by Teju Cole is published by Mack, £35.

First monograph,
from 2016,
of Russian-
Ghanaian artist
Liz Johnson Artur



Liz Johnson Artur

Woman's
expression ...
Durante in
Isadora Now



'She taught me to love my skin'

Until her death in a freak accident, Isadora Duncan transformed dance. Now Viviana Durante is reviving her feminist free spirit, writes **Lyndsey Winship**

You'll have to excuse me, I'm just trying to fight with this veil," says Viviana Durante, wrestling with an unwieldy sheet of coral silk as I walk into her studio. Voluminous wafting scarves are a key prop in the image and mythology of Isadora Duncan, the American pioneer of modern dance whose life was as free-spirited as her art. Durante is hoping to tap into some of that spirit in her latest production, honouring the unconventional dance icon.

A leading ballerina with the Royal Ballet in the 1990s, 52-year-old Durante is returning to the stage in *Isadora Now*, the third outing for her own company. As well as Durante performing Frederick Ashton's *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan*, there will be the rare sight of a 1911 Duncan work, *Dance of the*

Furies, and a new piece by Joy Alpuerto Ritter, recasting Duncan's freedom of expression and feminist power for current times.

Duncan's flowing, full-bodied dance was a rejection of the restrictions of classical ballet, inspired by her love of ancient Greece and performed in the drawing rooms of the wealthy in London and Paris at the turn of the 20th century. She expressed spirituality and sensuality, and garnered ardent fans - Rodin called her "the greatest woman the world has ever known" - as well as critics.

"I think she was very radical and very shocking," says Durante. "She had no inhibitions about showing or saying what she felt through her dance. And she wasn't afraid of the darkness of life." Duncan's own life held tragedy - the deaths of her children, two by drowning and a third soon after birth, then Duncan's own death in a freak accident aged 50 when her scarf got caught in the wheels of an open-topped car.

But Duncan's influence lives on, and in the studio her expressive abandon, grounded to the earth in bare feet, is proving tricky for Durante's petite, classically trained physique. Durante was always a passionate dancer, but within the refined context of ballet. "I'm trying but my feet are still in pointe shoes," she says, metaphorically. "It's not in my body yet!"

At her peak, Durante was one of the

best in the world, and to any casual observer her dancing still looks exquisite, but in the studio she gives a commentary of criticisms and apologies, self-judgment being an ingrained part of any ballet dancer's makeup. Yet when we meet again a few months later in her dressing room at the Barbican, some of Duncan's essence has seeped in. "I wish I'd experienced this process back when I was dancing [at the Royal Ballet]," she says. "You're not just learning the steps, it's much more like a spiritual journey that she takes you on." Immersing herself in Duncan's story has been a revelation for Durante. "She's taught me to love my skin, my body, who I am," she says. "She celebrated women. She's taught me to celebrate myself more. As a dancer you tend to doubt yourself."

Ballet training doesn't teach you to love your own skin? "Absolutely not," she says. "And it's a shame. Dancers should learn to love themselves more, because it opens your mind."

Last year, Durante was appointed director of dance at English National Ballet School. "I tell the students, 'I want you to have a voice.' If you're trying to teach somebody to have responsibilities on stage with their role, they also have to take responsibility for themselves. You have to allow them to grow, not just as a dancer but as people: the person is the dancer, and the dancer is the person. And as you grow older it's fine to appreciate that and not remain this childlike [dancer] - there's a danger of that." Durante's own career was derailed when she raised her voice, back in 1999, over a concern about the partner she'd been assigned, which led to the management cancelling her appearances and her leaving the Royal Ballet. "I think dancers have more of a voice now," she says. "But there's a tendency for a dancer to always think they're wrong, they're saying the wrong thing, which does not help them reflect on how they dance."

Durante's company comprises six dancers from classical and contemporary backgrounds (including ex-English National Ballet principal Begoña Cao) and she is encouraging them to trust themselves and embrace their femininity in all its forms. Duncan herself said she wanted not to dance in ballet tropes of nymphs and fairies, but "in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression". "And that's why I celebrate Isadora," she says. "She was a very courageous woman who celebrated herself - and celebrated dance."

Viviana Durante Company: Isadora Now is at the Barbican, London, until Saturday.