

The Photobook in Quebec: Current Perspectives

An exhibition curated by Serge Allaire

From October 3 to December 13, 2025

ARTIXE

Table of contents

7 Foreword

9 The Photobook in

Quebec:

Current Perspectives

15 Biography

17 Acknowledgements

Foreword

This isn't Artexte's first collaboration with Serge Allaire. As a historian of art and photography, we initially invited Allaire to do a research residency in 2016, where he inventoried all the photography-oriented books in our collection. His findings were subsequently published on our website as *The photobook at Artexte 1959–2017*. In this publication, Allaire presents an overview of the subject, while proposing a definition of the photobook as distinct from the monograph, the artist book, and the exhibition catalogue. Since this collaboration, Serge Allaire was curator of the photobook section of *Rencontres internationales de la photographie en Gaspésie* from 2015 to 2021. He has also organized exhibitions on the theme of the photobook in Montreal, Paris and Nantes.

The residency programme at Artexte enables us to explore blind spots observed by researchers in residence studying given aspects of our collection. The Artexte team is always on the lookout for new books in the contemporary arts field (via partnerships with specialized bookstores, publication swaps with other organizations, monitoring of social media, etc.). Nevertheless, we do inevitably miss some publications, leaving gaps in our collection. Following discussions in recent months, I asked Serge Allaire to create a new overview of photobooks published in Quebec between 2021 and 2025—certainly a useful and relevant undertaking for Artexte currently. While we already had some of the publications selected by Allaire in our collection, the exhibition *The Photobook in Quebec: Current Perspectives* enables us to get a more comprehensive update on our knowledge of recently published photobooks. I would especially like to thank the artists who have donated copies of their publications to Artexte. We greatly appreciate this crucial support, which allows for a greater number of people to discover artists' practices both during the exhibition and thereafter. From our beginnings in 1980 to the present day, the Artexte collection has existed in large part thanks to donations from artists, curators, critics, researchers, and teachers.

As curator of this project, Allaire has included monographs, artist books, and other book formats that foreground the relationship between text and image. Among the publications we received, I was struck by the level of care and detail put into the ordering of images, the choices of paper and binding, and by the diversity of formats, from the notebook to the tabloid. These are books that give full measure of current photography practices, and of the wide variety of subjects being tackled by artists today. These books allow us to archive the real, and to revisit forgotten or dormant bodies of work and historical periods in Quebec. Photographers often portray themselves, or people with whom they develop a relationship for the duration of a project, or subjects they photograph surreptitiously. Some photographers offer a point of view of the city and its neighbourhoods, others, a slice of nature or landscape. Others still explore the private sphere, the body, personal narratives, or portraiture. Some projects speak to issues around migration, racism, or gender identity. The image sometimes forges relationships with writing, poetry, or literature. Indeed, every individual photobook tells a story and embodies a unique way of looking at our world. And while some subjects recur from one artist to the next, it's interesting to observe the richness of these projects, each one opening up onto myriad points of view.

The exhibition *The Photobook in Quebec: Current Perspectives* is also a satellite activity of the MOMENTA biennial. I'm very proud of the fact that the project is part of this year's edition, which attracts countless visitors from here and elsewhere who are interested in current forms of image-making. This exhibition will indeed be an opportunity for different publics to get a fully comprehensive picture of photobook publishing in Quebec over recent years.

–Manon Tourigny

Translated from the French by Simon Brown

The Photobook in Quebec: Current Perspectives

When Artexte's director, Manon Tourigny, approached me with the idea of curating an exhibition of recent Quebec photobooks, I accepted without hesitation. I also quickly decided that the exhibition would cover the years 2021 to 2025, for the simple reason that the last photobook exhibition I organized was in 2021, at Maison de la culture Janine-Sutto. Over the past year, I've been able to assemble about sixty photobooks from this period, while for the first time incorporating a few artist monographs that I felt deserved particular attention.

The key difference between the photobook and the monograph is that the photobook hinges on a subject, that is, a theme backed up by sometimes extensive research, with images juxtaposed together or ordered so as to create a narrative, with or without accompanying text. In its more radical iterations, the photobook eschews text altogether, relying essentially on the expressive and narrative power of the image. Given this narrative dimension, the photobook exists in the interstice between literature and cinema—a film in still images.¹

The artist monograph, on the other hand, retrospectively presents a photographer's entire œuvre in book form. Now that we have that distinction out of the way, we must explore the subjects that characterize these recent publications. What genres and themes have

1 During a residency at Artexte in 2016, I published a text describing in greater detail the photobook and its structure as an object. It is available at the following URL: https://artexte.ca/app/uploads/2016/12/bibliography_versionweb_compressed_vf-2.pdf

photographers in Quebec been working with in the last few years?

Given the time frame in question, it seemed relevant to observe and analyze the varying facets of these publications. In total, I was able to identify ten categories and genres that convey the aesthetic concerns of this period. Most publications I studied revolve primarily around questions relating to documentary photo, urban landscape, photography, poetry, and the photo essay.²

Documentary

Documentary photo, such as I have observed here, is first and foremost photography practised in direct contact with a given social reality. Documentary photo projects seek to capture a social phenomenon, a community, or a neighbourhood. This type of project usually stems from a long or medium-term research period, and often incorporates street photography, portrait photography, or architectural photography, as well as incursions into the private sphere. Identity is often an underlying question in documentary photo practices.

Social landscape

Social landscape, or urban landscape, is an American designation for a genre that came into its own in the 1960s. It is usually associated with photographers like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. The term was initially coined for the exhibition *Contemporary Photographers—Toward a Social Landscape* created at the George Eastman House (Rochester, N.Y) in 1966.

In a nutshell, social landscape photography explores urban dynamics, relationships between people, the street, and architecture. Social landscape understands the social context as a stage with many actors. There is clearly overlap between this type of photography and what has come to be called street photography.

Photo essay

In this category, we find publications that, to put it simply, resist conventional classification and take substantial

² It goes without saying that the boundary lines between these categories are quite porous. And some people, of course, prefer other terminology.

liberties in regard to tradition, in terms of both form and content. For example, here we find publications that experimentally explore the expressive possibilities of the image and the book as forms, sometimes pushing these forms to the limits of abstraction. These explorations are narrative, theory, and literary approaches: poetically tinged essays and statement pieces blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction.

Poetry and photography

This genre is characterized by poems usually written by the artist. In this case, the text does not serve a function of commentary or description as such, but rather it coexists with the image autonomously, sharing the role of creative object on an equal footing with the images themselves.

The other genres identified during my research stem largely from those already mentioned, and address topics somewhat less explored during the period in question: nature and landscape, biography/autobiography, photography archives, still life, and feminist approaches (see List of documents).

Photographic Approaches

Thus far, we have discussed photographic categories and genres with respect to their content, without necessarily examining the formal approaches of the photographs in question.

Here, we should note that the aesthetic choices and approaches used by these photographers—regardless of genre—signal a definitive and radical break with the objectivity of documentary³ photo. The documentary style as defined by Olivier Lugon has more or less become doxa in the photography world. Established in the 1930s by photographers like August Sander and Walker Evans, this aesthetic tradition privileges clarity and neutrality, and avoids the distinguishing marks of authorship. Formally speaking, this is achieved via a respectful distance from the subject, limited framing, and compositional approaches that avoid aestheticization, often articulated around a symmetrical axis.

³ Olivier Lugon, *Le Style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920-1945*, Paris, Macula, 2017, 400 p.

Documentary style, which came into its own in the 1930s, today presents certain limitations. This is for two primary reasons: firstly, it is based on essentially formal criteria; and secondly, it has a tendency to disregard Robert Frank's work from the 1950s. Although he was close to Walker Evans, Frank ended up developing his own entirely different approach.

Unlike Evans, Robert Frank worked with a small format camera (35 mm), more portable and flexible than the bulky large-format cameras used by Evans. The 35 mm camera allowed Frank to do away with the respectful distance between photographer and subject. His framing thus tended to much tighter, creating a space of proximity and intimacy with the subject.

In their inaugural 1996 catalogue, the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie* identified Robert Frank as the figurehead of subjective photography in the 20th century.

This brief historical detour serves to identify the photographic approaches that characterize the vast majority, if not all of the publications presented in this exhibition, which share greater affinity with the work of Robert Frank than with that of "photographic style". This generally applies across all categories and genres I came into contact with here.

I first noticed this affinity during a thorough examination of the works to be presented in the exhibition. In addition to the specificities already mentioned, the approaches privileged share strong similarities with Frank's methods, with close shooting range, an abandonment of respectful distance in favour of proximity and intimacy with the subject, an embrace of camera shake and blur at the expense of clarity and sharpness, and a renunciation of strict frontal perspective. These visual markers—particularly camera shake and blur—inscribe upon the image the presence of the photographer as subject, and affirm the subjectivity of the photographic image itself. All of these characteristics are found to varying degrees in the works presented here. Some will argue that questioning documentary objectivity is not new, and this is true. However,

in the context of this exhibition, and given the large number works presented, this clarification seemed necessary to me.

-Serge Allaire

Translated from the French by Simon Brown

Biography

Serge Allaire is a specialist in Quebec, Canadian and international contemporary art history, as well as in the history of photography. He taught in the Department of Art History at UQÀM for several years. As an independent curator, he has contributed to numerous exhibitions and catalogues. In 1993, as part of the Mois de la Photo in Montreal, he presented a reflection on documentary practices in Quebec titled *Une tradition documentaire. Quelle tradition? Quel documentaire?* He also contributed to various publications, including *Montréal au XXe siècle : Regards de photographes* (Les Éditions de l'Homme, 1995), *Les arts au Québec dans les années soixante* (volume II, VLB Éditeur, 1993), and *John Max. Quelque chose suit son cours* (Musée de la photographie, Belgium, 1997). He has also written specialized articles for *Spirale*, *Ciel Variable*, *ONF*, and *Vie des arts* magazines.

As a guest curator at the *Rencontres internationales de la photographie* in Gaspésie, Serge Allaire was responsible for the photography book section during five years (2015–2021). He has also organized exhibitions on Quebec photography books in France, notably at the *Photautnnales* (Beauvais, 2016), at the *Polycopies* international photography book fair (Paris, 2016), and at *Loco éditeur* (Paris, 2018), and in Montreal in partnership with *MOMENTA Biennale de l'image*. As a researcher, he has completed several residencies on the theme of the photobook, notably at *Arttexte* (Montreal, 2016) and the *Canadian Photography Institute* (Ottawa, 2017).

Acknowledgements

My thanks go first and foremost to Manon Tourigny, General and Artistic Director of Artexte, who gave me the opportunity to create this exhibition, as well as to the entire Artexte team who accompanied me in this adventure with such kindness at every level, particularly Kaysie Hawke, Amed Aroche, Jonathan Lachance, Anabelle Chassé, and Maude Levasseur.

Finally, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Encadrex and Robert Graham for their unwavering support.

Artexte supports artists, researchers, and curators in a collective effort that involves our entire team, including external collaborators who participate in the success of each project. In alphabetical order:

Collaborators: Alexis Bernard (photo documentation), Simon Brown (translation), Mark Lowe (exhibition technician), Alexandre Michaud (copy-editing), and Yannick Renaud (exhibition technician).

Artexte would like to thank MOMENTA Biennale d'art contemporain, which generously included this exhibition in the satellite program of their 19th edition, and the Maison de la culture Janine-Sutto for lending us their display tables, as well as Encadrex and Robert Graham for their support to this exhibition. Finally, thanks to the Conseil des arts de Montréal, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and the Canada Council for the Arts for their support.

ARTEXTE

ISBN 978-2-923045-70-2

ARTEXTE
2, Sainte-Catherine Street East (room 301)
Montreal, QC H2X 1K4
514-874-0049