

This is a pre-print author-approved manuscript of a 1000-word review essay by Annabella Pollen for Source: *Thinking through Photography* published in issue 107, Spring 2022, pp. 74-75.

Covid Photobooks

Fleur van Dodewaard, *Left Hand, Right Hand* (Torch Press, 2021)

Carly, Darren, Joe, Andre, Craig and Kelly, *Out of Home* (Dan Barker & Lucy Ward, 2021)

Hold Still: A Portrait of our Nation in 2020 (National Portrait Gallery, 2021)

Following the announcement of international lockdowns in 2020, participatory photography projects immediately sprang up in response. Whether designed to create communities during periods of isolation or to provide opportunities to visualise strange new sights, from empty city streets to Personal Protective Equipment, Covid-19 photography projects caught public imaginations, received significant arts and culture funding, and resulted in exhibitions and publications, large and small.

Three recent photobooks provide a cross-section. *Left Hand, Right Hand* is a 2021 publication by Dutch artist, Fleur van Dodewaard. Over the last decade, van Dodewaard has been the recipient of several awards including an artistic residency funded by KAIR Kamiyama that, had it not been for Covid-19, would have entailed travel to the small Japanese mountain village on Shikoku island. Instead, for a year, van Dodewaard explains, she ‘travelled back and forth to Kamiyama without leaving Amsterdam’ by supplying 15 residents – men, women and children - with disposable cameras and 27 thematic instructions, one for each exposure.

The 27 subjects included ‘a red object’, a child jumping and ‘the person you love most’. Presented in a tall, slim peach-coloured volume, with folding covers and stitched binding, the results are grouped without caption or credit in a bilingual book that can be read from either end. At its centre are the right and left hands of the participants, as per two instructions, and a set of negative prints highlighting the experiment’s analogue format. *Left Hand, Right Hand* does not depict Covid-19 but its subject matter and shape evokes shared experiences and communicates exchange in the face of isolation. In its sequencing, beginning (if one reads from left to right) with clusters of beds after waking and breakfast tables, it follows the day-in-the-life format so popular in collective photography projects, where shared daily patterns bridge distances between strangers. The formal parameters – a one-time chance with a single-use camera – provides the conceptual structure but also conveys immediacy. The final / first photograph shows a finger in the frame. In some contexts, this could signal amateur error, but it is a powerful picture in a publication in search of presence.

Out of Home had a very different purpose to *Left Hand, Right Hand*, but shares some similarities as a stylish limited edition stitched 2021 book of uncaptioned prints (designed by Ben Weaver, art director of *The Wire* magazine). Like *Left Hand, Right Hand*, it uses disposable cameras and credits its participants only by their forenames. *Out of Home*, however, was designed to provide support for homeless Londoners for whom lockdown created unique challenges. Even if *The Big Issue* could be sold, there were few people around to sell it to; those who usually survive on contributions from strangers faced empty streets. Dan Barker, a digital marketing entrepreneur, and his wife Lucy Wood, initially financed the project, paying homeless people to produce photographs at £20 a camera. With loose guidelines in place for subject and style – anything you find interesting; daylight preferred – and with the expectation that no more than an hour and 45 mins would be spent on the project per day, thus meeting the London Living Wage – *Out of Home* published over 60 photographs by six participants, including by one who died during the project.

The spreads include monochrome and colour photographs, mostly exteriors scenes. There are some loose thematic groupings around private property, contrasts between poverty and luxury, and low-angle underpasses and pavements seen from a street sleeper's viewpoint. Boarded-up buildings convey being locked out as well as locked down. The camera's hard flash illuminates reflective jackets of looming police. Fingers in the frame evoke unselfconsciousness and life lived on the fly. The visual effects of inadequately wound-on film and the disorientation of blur are used in the book to evoke precarious existence in a hostile city. In addition to the publication, sold to raise money for the photographers and for homeless charities, selected photographs were assembled into an outdoor exhibition at London's St Martin in the Fields, supported by National Lottery Funding.

Hold Still is pandemic photography project on a much larger scale, with over 31,000 crowdsourced submissions and a 2021 hardback book that has achieved best-selling status. It too had an outdoor exhibition with images on hoardings shown in over 80 towns and cities across the UK. Its principal sponsor, National Portrait Gallery, shaped the brief so that people were the central focus, and provided more prescriptive themes: *Helpers and Heroes*; *Your New Normal*; *Acts of Kindness*. The 100 winning entries – judged by a panel that included the Duchess of Cambridge, photographer Maryam Wahid and Chief Nursing Officer, Ruth May – have been styled as a 'portrait of our nation', and include extensive representations of public service workers, families separated by windows and screens, and plentiful rainbows and Union Jacks.

Each *Hold Still* photograph comes accompanied by a first-person narrative, detailing the circumstances behind each image, which seem mostly split between the communication of two core but contrasting emotions: desperation and resilience. Poet, Lemn Sissay, *Hold Still* judge and author

of the book's foreword, states that the project captures 'the nation at its absolute best' and more than a thousand five-star reviews on Amazon confirm its popularity. With its net proceeds being split between National Portrait Gallery and the mental health charity, Mind, it might seem churlish to say anything critical about the book but inevitably one wonders about the 30,900 photographs that were not selected, and what kinds of moods, subjects and styles they might have covered. If the full body is similar to the archive of all 55,000 submissions to a similar participatory charity project – *One Day for Life* in 1987, which was also headed by a member of the Royal Family, the Duchess of York – the rejected photographs will contain fascinating counternarratives to the celebratory framing.

Participatory photography projects in lockdown were many and various; these are only a sample. They may have been established spontaneously and without knowledge of parallel or pre-existing endeavours but each shows faith in photography's power to connect and communicate, even if only briefly, and to provide structure and purpose in the most bewildering of collective circumstances.