

## **Finding Found Photobooks**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Photobook-making provides one way to address how meaning is typically made from photographs. As both an action and a thing, the picture can mean more than it is generally designed for. As disconnected from traditional owner and authorship, found photographs, in particular, aid reflection on the processes that birth images, their meanings, and their value. As an artistic installation, "Finding Found Photobooks" utilizes iterative events for re-contextualizing photographs to induce an organic, processual-reflective reading of their content. Using a research through design approach to photobook design and art installation, this work foregrounds reoccurring compositional techniques, image content, and imaging technology as aesthetic concerns available to the viewing public. Therefore, viewers may recognize their personal biases for meaning-making while observing the act of observation presented in the books. Doing so affords the experience of "Finding Found Photobooks."

**CCS CONCEPTS •Applied computing~Arts and humanities~Media arts**

**Additional Keywords and Phrases:** materialist semiotics, immersive imaging, found photo, photobook, recursive

## 1 INTRODUCING “FINDING FOUND PHOTOBOOKS”

"Finding Found Photobooks" is a cross-disciplinary art project aiming to produce a reoccurring series of photobooks through several exhibitions and workshops. The artwork aims to enable a critical viewing of the images' content and how they came to exist. As the title suggests, reflexivity is at play within the act of finding. "Found" refers to photos as objects within a subgenre of photography called "found photos," while "Finding" refers to the physical act of locating content. The artwork assumes a similar epistemological complexity between photography and design. Both infer an action involved in product-making and simultaneously refer to an object. A design can be an image, like a blueprint. And a photograph can be the act of designing the visible for others to verify. They both allow oscillation between immersive acts of producing content [1].

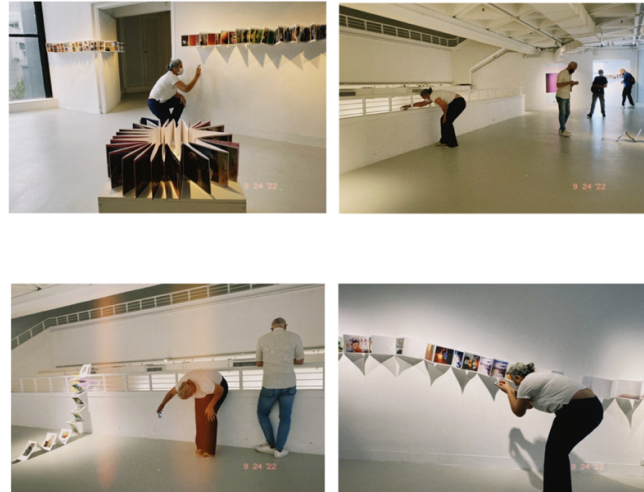
In photobook form, meaning is made between photos [2] or between the individual pictures and an unseen database [3] which they signify as being plucked from. Yet, seeing the imaging process remains the goal of both book and installation design. Using an iterative, research through design approach to bookmaking, they are designed for readers to notice reoccurring motifs resulting from human selection, machine operability, and intentional versus accidental display. Therefore, meanings found when viewing the photobooks directly address previous acts of finding. The artwork is designed to adapt to nearly any space. Sixteen books exist: eight from the first round of (exhibition) display, then eight remakes. These can be folded/compressed for single readings or extended in physical/virtual space for shared viewing based on the curator's desires.

## 2 DESCRIBING THE WORK'S THEMATIC CONTEXT

The artwork aims to show that in the algorithmic era, image production is fluid, as is meaning. It uses a medium of digital Hong Kong found photos taken around the year two thousand to induce such an experience. Gathered piecemeal and discovered accidentally, this database of photos was disconnected from specific value-laden labels or intentions. Instead, the images' value is designed to change via their iterative exposure to the public. Each time they were creatively installed, visitors (as participants) re-contextualized the images by photographing them using period-specific (antique) digital cameras. Through successive viewings, alternative databases of re-contextualized images replaced the original book prints. When redesigned and printed anew, participants can navigate many potential meanings and intentions for their display.

Evidencing the reoccurring nature of images indicates how photos move from hashtagged personal image feeds (through social media or search engines) to large databases of similar photos, back to another's personalized image feed through algorithms targeting personalized preferences for personalized content. Observing this process is akin to a

critical medium viewing practice. Participants may notice how displayed photographs redirect attention to the environment they are placed within. The easily extended installation and display of the photobook aids such redirection.



**Figure 1: Four examples of books installed during the first exhibition and taken by a participant**

Books were displayed in several large rooms on two floors of the gallery. Visitors browsed the books and prints which extended throughout the gallery. As participants, they were also invited to photograph the exhibition using antique, low-resolution digital cameras. As mere spectators or camera-wielding participants, visitors were free to photograph and alter camera settings however they liked.

In the photos above, humans are taking pictures of photographs contained within eight books in the gallery. The content of these books is divided into four guiding themes, while two books exist for each theme. The themes revolve around how images can be displayed and made meaning through their socio-technical support structure. Thinking of technology's agentic potential, the four themes are designed to articulate this structure. They include:

1. "Date" (showing the machine working as intended)
2. "Decay" (showing the machine working accidentally)
3. "Stock" (showing intent to display images as original)
4. "Meta" (showing accidental/unintentional content and meaning alongside the original)

Themes 1 and 2 infer meaning made from the human viewer's (or user's) perspective, while 3 and 4 infer designerly decisions made during the production of images. Taken together, these themes provide different pathways to meaning-making through the grouping of the pictures. The found photographs producing these themes were re-contextualized by

the artist by being grouped accordingly. Yet, the photobooks invite others to de-contextualize, to take photos of these photos while likely including evidence of the exhibition context.

The photographs taken of the books, the images in them, and the exhibition environment are evidence of what can be found or noticed in the artwork. The photos serve as evidence of an exhibition taking place. But, through their dates imprinted in the bottom corner, the images also show a camera (or machine) working as intended. Being very low in resolution, the pixels themselves also evidence technological capabilities. However, anomalies of unexpected pixelation or color ghosting also signify the old machine is not working properly.

A meta-view of the 'machine' can also be located through two degrees of observation. First, we can see people noticing, then photographing photos of cameras/machines working properly or improperly while using cameras that may not be working properly. Observing observation [4] can inevitably lead the visitor to wonder about the working conditions of the old camera they are using [5]. Therefore, taking photos of photographs helps the visitor to view all of the presented pictures as stock photographs designed explicitly for re-contextualization. If so, the exhibition can be conceived as an artistic mechanism for viewing systems that re-produce images and prescribe meaning to them [5].

### 3 RECREATING CONTENT

In recent decades, social system theorists have articulated the observing of observation [4] as indicative of a renewed modernity. Social actants recognize such newness by noting differences from earlier imaging trends [5]. However, the displayed pictures' similarities to earlier versions could induce more awareness of socio-technical conditions [6] underlying the image's existence. When unpacked into stages, this artwork reveals one way that such reflexive sensitivities could be operationalized through the recursive design of photobooks. One way to show such repetition is by revealing the multiple reproductions of a found photo. Providing dates, pixelated decay, or questionable photo-taker intent as alternative avenues for meaning to be made assists in this aim.

Designed to be reoccurring, the "Finding Found Photobooks" can be broken into reoccurring stages, which re-contextualizes images through book making and presenting. Conversely, de-contextualization occurs through photographing the photographs. In so doing, smaller, individually curated datasets were abstracted from a more extensive database of images taken by more than one photographer.

The first stage includes a database of several thousand found photographs collected from abandoned digital cameras. Of these, the artist created a dataset of five hundred photos to create the first set of eight books. Figure 2 shows one of these photos. It is a photo that evidences both a smiley face formed in coffee foam and a date and time when (supposedly) the photograph was taken. Once chosen by the artist, the picture exists in stage two and is ready to be photographed again in a shared viewing environment.



**Figure 2: The photograph chosen by the artist from the extensive database of found photos in stage one**

In stage three, a new database was created. Over one thousand photographs were taken of the photobooks in the exhibition. The pictures show several avenues for meaning-making. For example, we may notice that the smiley face seems a popular choice to photograph in the gallery. Yet through the combination of photos, we may notice this photo's social and physical context. Even more, differences in tint, resolution, date imprint or photonegative function help us notice the coffee photo's technological context.

In stage four, the artist created a new dataset of one hundred twenty-five photographs from stage three's database of one thousand. These were chosen to reinforce the four photobook themes and the most photographed things in the gallery. Again, the photonegative picture of the smiley face was chosen as an example.



**Figure 3: Four views of the smiley-faced coffee photograph taken by participants during stage three**

Stage five presented stage four's dataset of one hundred twenty-five photographs to visitors for another shared photo-taking experience. However, this time, the pictures were presented in a more informal gallery and workshop setting, where participants were again asked to photograph whatever they liked. Rather than antiques, participants used modern digital cameras on their phones to de-contextualize the photonegative smiling face, as seen in Figures 3 and [4](#). The artwork is now in stage six. The books have been redesigned to evidence all the preceding stages and are ready to be displayed again along with the originals.

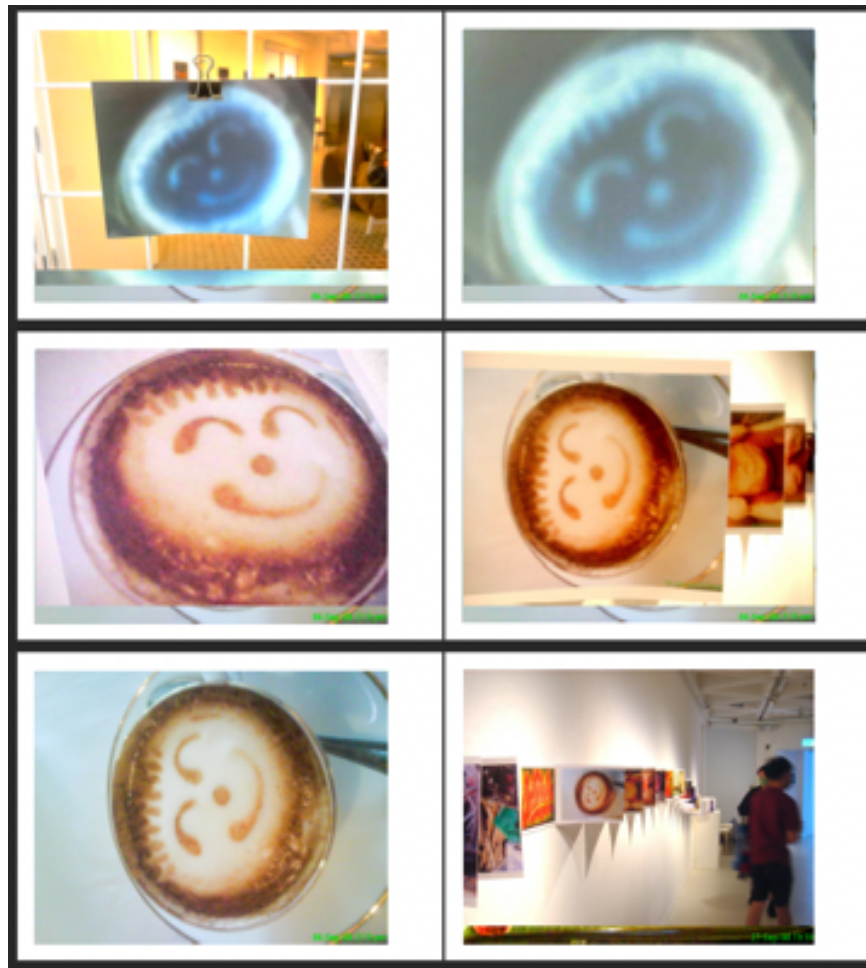


**Figure 4: The smiley face coffee photograph re-presented for participants in stage five**

#### **4 READING CONTEXT THROUGH CONTENT**

Once stages one through six of de- and re-contextualization were complete, several methods were used to induce a process-oriented reading of images. (All examples used come from a remaking of one of the "Date"-themed books.) The books were redesigned using different types of reproduction of original content, which occurred at each step in the production of the artwork as a continual series of interactions with similar images. While the smiling coffee example concretely shows the layering of effort in each exposure to re-mediation, creative tactics could become much more subtle.

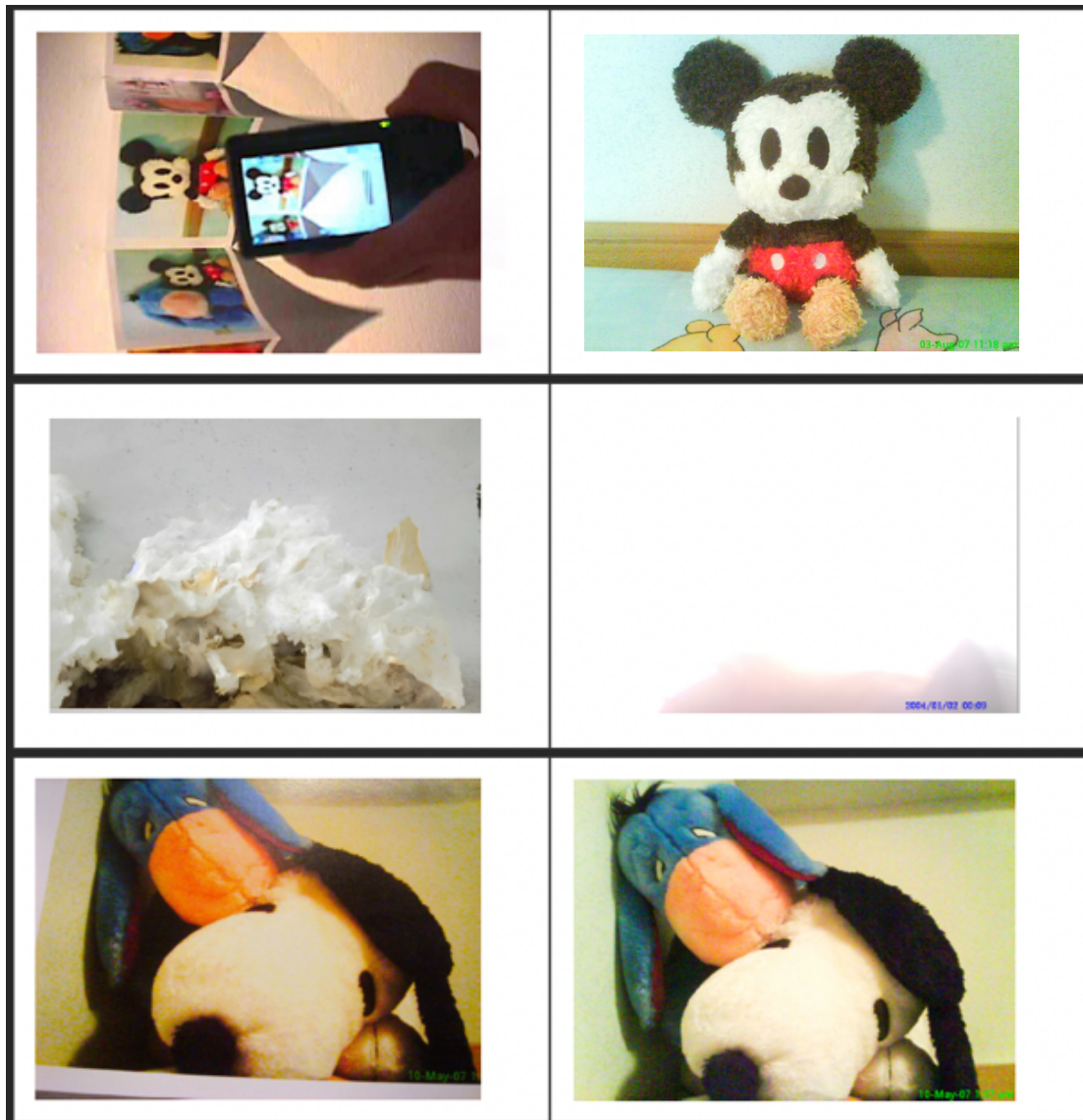




**Figure 5: Six redesigned book pages show sequential meaning-making techniques used in stage six**

Alternative display methods could include contemporary means of image augmentation or virtuality. For example, when observing the secondary database of one thousand images produced in stage three, many photos were found of people taking pictures with their phones or camera. These photos revealed the participant's apparent intent to re-contextualize the image(s) in the same "Date"-themed book pictured earlier. By showing augmentation of the original, image-making acts become important content for meaning-making through the new image created. However, these photos also showed existing attention paid to specific photographs in the book.





**Figure 6: Six redesigned book pages show alternative technological contextualization techniques used in stage six**

Alternatively, if there were photographs that were not noticed and re-presented, these non-re-photographed images were fed to a current predictive-algorithmic (Ai) model to produce radically new content. Contrary to augmentation practices, these Ai generated images were not indexical to the 'real' of the visitor's experience in any concrete way. Instead, they signify Ai's learning model rather than the latent database of images and intentions in the photographer's mind. These two

alternatives for a re-presented display of the original turn a noticeable medium into the message [7] and are ready for renewed meaning-making.

## 5 RENEWED FINDINGS

The redesigned photobooks in Figures 5 and 6 can now be used for another iteration of the artwork in a new setting. As such, they show a photobook incorporating views of itself into itself and ready for more public exposure. The human culture surrounding their display will likely influence the photographs taken of them in the future. For one, these future photographs may show the intentions of specific audiences [8]. Archivists may notice different elements than street photographers, visual communication designers, .jpeg algorithm writers, or residents with firsthand experiences of the pictured scenarios. Additionally, they may be a higher resolution or exist entirely as screenshots, indicating a change in the technological medium's capacity to re-present the visible using commonly recognizable methods.

This artwork is both finished and ongoing. On the one hand, a reoccurring loop between stages one through six can be seen. As such, the photo's content and its socio-technical context can also be found when making meaning from the images as displayed [9]. On the other hand, the artwork is finished precisely because it shows an inevitable return to contexts of re-contextualization. This return is needed for the work to evolve, thereby allowing viewers to recognize its valuable attributes. Such value comes from the book's ability to evidence a systemic observation of photographs. What is found when finding these found photos? Ideally, a medium-critical observation both *of* the tools yet also *through* the imaging tools emerges. If so, "Finding Found Photobooks" presents the value of noticing a collective experience of individually interpreted meaning-making from the past.

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