

the guardian

Printing sponsored by:

Kodak
 All-in-One Printers

 Sean O'Hagan
 On photography


The DIY photobook phenomenon

Self Publish, Be Happy – a project aimed at helping aspiring photographers to produce their own books – has now released a work of its own. And it's really rather beautiful

Sean O'Hagan

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 25 July 2012 17:35 BST



AB&OC, the first book published by Self Publish, Be Happy, features a series of polaroids by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

Although it has only been going for two years, Self Publish, Be Happy has already become a hub for aspiring photographers, outsiders and exhibitionists. It has even spawned an offshoot, Self Publish, Be Naughty, dedicated to self-made photobooks that celebrate "naughty pics", mostly of girlfriends taken by boyfriends and vice-versa. One of their bestsellers is Getting to Know My Husband's Cock, by Ellen Jong; like many of their photobooks, it's not nearly as naughty as its eye-catching title suggests.

SPBH is the brainchild of writer and academic Bruno Ceschel. It was founded with the aim of "celebrating, studying and promoting self-published photobooks" via events, publications and the web. Not strictly a publisher, SPBH runs workshops that show photographers how to make and distribute their own books, posting the results on their daily blog and acting as a repository of knowledge.

"People send us the physical object," says Ceschel. "It could be a book or a stapled 'zine. Then we choose what we like and put it up on the site with all the details of how it was made, where it was printed, how much it costs and how to order a copy. It's all about thinking and creating outside the mainstream model of publishing, which most young photographers can't afford or simply don't want to get involved with."

Now SPBH are actually publishing a book of their own; or, to be more precise, three books bearing their imprint over the next year. The first is entitled AB&OC and

features polaroids by [Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin](#), who gave Ceschel his first job back when they were creative directors of [Benetton's controversial COLORS magazine](#). It's a rather beautiful little book: a random selection of polaroids, some of which were done as test shots for editorial shoots. There are portraits (Amy Winehouse, Paula Rego, Alision Lapper, Adam by Oliver and Oliver by Adam) as well as still lifes (skulls, a leaf, a bird's nest) and a shot of Adam's right foot and Oliver's right hand. The print run is 250 and each comes with an original polaroid mounted on the cover: a picture of a hand, or hands, forming a word in sign language.

This has led to another departure for the ever-inventive Ceschel: the launch of the SPBH Book Club. "From the start, I've been interested in exploring new business models for book publishing," he says. "It struck me that the book club was an idea that could be revitalised for the digital age. SPBH is not really about the book as a beautiful object. In fact, many of the titles are about imperfection: they have a kind of DIY fanzine aesthetic. The Adam and Ollie book is actually quite beautiful and surprising. It is more about the book as an art object."

A year's membership costs £100. For that, you receive the Bloomberg and Chanarin book (which alone would cost you £50) and two more books in the course of the year. The second, to be launched at Paris Photo in November, will feature photographs from the personal collection of [Brad Feuerhelm](#). A London-based dealer and collector of vintage American [photography](#), Feuerhelm has amassed thousands of strange and disturbing found images, from three-legged dogs to contortionists, severed limbs to apparitions. There are plans to include a found photograph or a negative inside each copy. The third publication has yet to be decided.

"The aim of the book club," says Ceschel, "is similar to the overall SPBH ethos – to build a community in which to share ideas, have discussions and debates about photography and publishing stuff outside the mainstream."

When I met Ceschel last week, he was in the middle of moving house, preparing to shift 22 large boxes of self-published books into a room in his new south London home. "It's the first proper office I've ever had," he says cheerfully. "Until now, the whole SPBH operation has been run from my bedroom. I see myself as a catalyst of sorts, someone who makes order out of chaos. We have 3,000 visitors to our site every day, so I guess I must be doing something right. I just need to start making some money from my ideas."

His reinvention of the book club for the internet age could be the way. "It's a leap of faith," he says, "but then again, so is everything I do."

Now see this

London is currently awash with Olympics-based projects, including [the Photographers' Gallery's The World in London](#) and the National Portrait Gallery's [Road to 2012](#). Meanwhile, [Photofusion's intriguing group show, Residual Traces](#), curated by Troika Editions, looks at the dramatic transformation of the Lea Valley wilderness in east London, which is now a network of housing developments, trendy cafes and cycle paths. It explores the impact this has had on local working-class communities, many of whom have been marginalised even more by the Olympic juggernaut of commerce and supposed regeneration. Photographers include Stephen Gill, Sophia Evans and Zed Nelson.

At Goldsmiths University in Lewisham, from 30 July, [London Independent Photography](#) is hosting the [London Villages Project](#), in which 200 of its members have looked at London's various communities – ethnic, social, geographical – in the year leading up to the Olympics.