

“One must have an ardent desire. People (...) can surmount any difficulty. Absorb whatever is useful to us. If there is to be revolution, there must be a (...) party.” In true ‘redacted’ fashion, Cristina De Middel’s photobook, *Party. Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (2013), contains phrases that might be used ad lib to summarise what has been going on among Spanish photographers in recent years. Indeed, if we stick to the satirical tone and ignore the political context, it could be argued that Spain has taken a Great Leap Forward. This revolution in the making is not, however, about names or places; it has more to do with a fertile ground that has been wisely cultivated and ploughed.

This leap has attracted the attention of publishers, curators, editors, art collectors, gallerists, writers, designers, academics and of course fellow photographers around the world, eager to discover the new wave of Spanish photographers in their late 20s, 30s and, in some cases, 40s. This new crop comprises photographers who, having lost their faith in traditional institutions, have been slowly, quietly creating some remarkable bodies of work and

self-publishing, or partnering on innovative photobooks, establishing their own independent publishing houses and making their own destinies.

In the last five years, Spain’s emerging photographers – an adjective that is more nuanced than descriptive – haven’t just decided to emancipate themselves from the photography establishment, they are embracing technology and storming social networks, using every tool at their disposal to communicate and express themselves, trying to quench their thirst for learning and connecting with their peers. And they are doing all that in an atmosphere of cross-pollination, hectic experimentation and a search for a distinctive voice.

This awakening was sparked by an overriding sense of disappointment, first and foremost with public and private cultural institutions in Spain, but also with the flagship event dedicated to photography, PhotoEspaña, which in previous years has commanded budgets well above most photofestivals around the world. PhotoEspaña’s organiser, La Fábrica (a profit-making cultural management firm whose ever-growing list of activities includes book and magazine

publishing) is often criticised for not paying enough attention to young, emerging Spanish photographers. This year, however, it honours the ethos on which it was founded and devotes most of its programme to homegrown talent.

This year’s festival includes three group exhibitions in its official section – a sure sign that the climate is changing: *Photography 2.0*, curated by Joan Fontcuberta (who is interviewed in this issue on page 34); *P2P: Contemporary Practice in Spanish Photography*, organised by British curator Charlotte Cotton alongside Spanish photographers and editors Luis Díaz and Iñaki Domingo; and *Mapping the Blind Spots*, a collaboration between photo collectives NoPhoto in Spain, and Sputnik Photos, whose members are from central and eastern Europe. In addition, the Fundación Telefónica held a series of events titled *A Chronicle of Contemporary Photography in Spain*, chaired by curator Alejandro Castellote. The Museo Reina Sofía is hosting a review of Spanish historical and contemporary photobooks curated by editor and academic Horacio Fernández, and there is also a much-celebrated cycle of exhibitions at

the Institut Français (although the exhibitions are not organised by PhotoEspaña), curated by Nicolás Combarro, who invited several photographers to create ad hoc remix shows.

Ricardo Cases – whose *Paloma al aire* (2011), along with De Middel’s *The Afronauts* (2012), is widely considered a turning point for the international appreciation of Spanish photography – is sceptical about the reach of PhotoEspaña’s initiatives. “The breeding ground for this awakening in photography has not been – as might have been expected – PhotoEspaña,” says Cases, a member of the highly acclaimed collective Blank Paper. Cases, interviewed elsewhere in this issue (see page 68), explains how Blank Paper, whose members include Julian Barón and Fosi Vegue, has been important in helping him grow as a photographer.

“The real changemakers and pioneers have been the people behind seminal photo events like Emergent-Lleida (Jesús Vilamajó), the Seminario de Albarracín in Teruel (Gervasio Sánchez) and SevillaFoto (Óscar Romero and others), as well as the Cádiz-based gallery and publishing project Kursala (Jesús Micó). Those initiatives have

allowed photographers to get together, learn, show their work, exchange ideas and develop a much-needed confidence boost.

“Madrid? Barcelona? They never put in the funds, or had the drive, to seriously promote upcoming Spanish photographers,” says Cases. “And this year’s edition of PhotoEspaña does not include any individual shows by new photographers that rival the work of previous generations. Not even from Antonio Xoubanova’s *Casa de Campo*, or Aleix Plademunt’s *Almost There* – books published by Mack,” he adds, referring to the London-based publisher of his own upcoming book, *El porqué de las naranjas* – a publisher known for championing emerging talent.

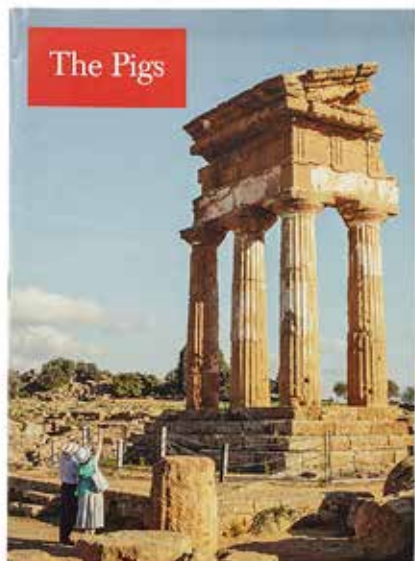
Plademunt, a Catalan photographer, also paints a grim picture. “There are no individual shows by photographers from our generation in either PhotoEspaña or in Barcelona. We are not receiving the same appreciation here as we are getting abroad.” He also believes Spanish publishers – another key element of the art world – are not as likely to take chances. “When Michael Mack invests in a photobook by Xoubanova or by myself, he

is taking risks and effectively supporting photography. You don’t take many risks when you do a group exhibition and try to fit in a large number of authors.” And as far as galleries are concerned, Plademunt believes “there is no real interest to show present-day work by lesser-known photographers”.

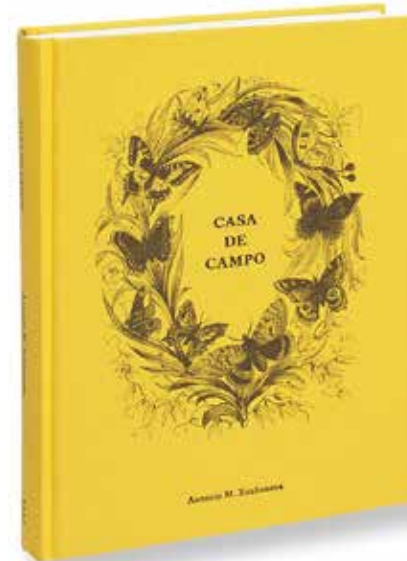
So what do you do? You start your own project. “When photographers realised they didn’t fit or were being ignored by existing structures, they started to create their own, either individually or as part of a group,” says Plademunt. “To compensate for that disconnect and lack of support, we photographers have created our own publishing houses, like in my case Ca l’Isidret Edicions (together with Juan Diego Valera and Roger Gaus), so that we can publish our own work.” Plademunt says due credit must also be given to curators such as Marta Dahó and photographer Albert Gusi, and trailblazers like David Jiménez, with his acclaimed photobook *Infinito*, published by Photovision in 2000, who have all been catalysts of change and inspiration for many up-and-coming photographers. “They have been



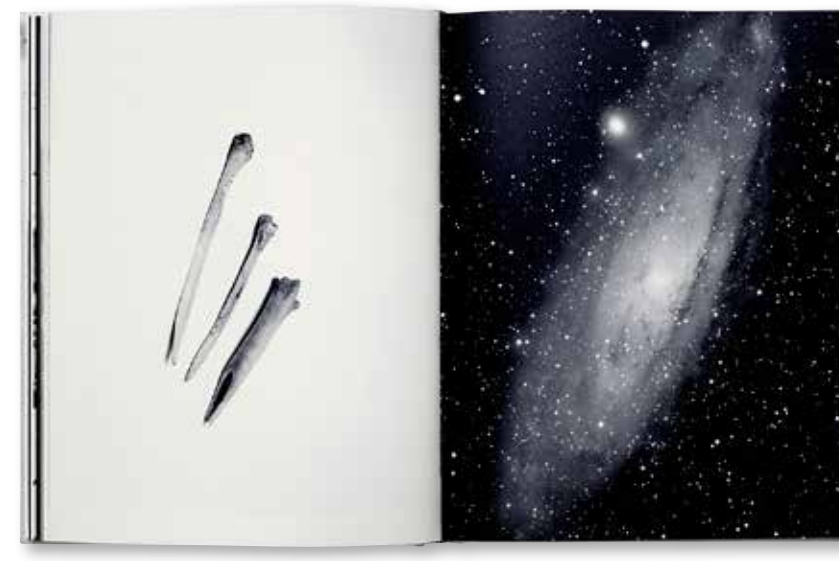
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Six contemporary Spanish photobooks

- 1 *Paloma al aire* by Ricardo Cases was a slow burner, first published in 2011, later becoming a cult phenomenon. Cases is now publishing a second edition with Dalpine.
- 2 Winner of last year’s Kassel Photobook Award, Carlos Spottorno’s *The Pigs* uses the format of *The Economist* to present a portrait of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain in financial decline.
- 3 Oscar Monzón’s *Karma* takes a voyeuristic look through the car window. Its bold, uncompromising design won it last year’s Aperture / Paris Photo Photobook Award.
- 4 *Casa de Campo* by Antonio Xoubanova is an idiosyncratic exploration of Madrid’s biggest park, published by Mack Books in February 2013. Like Oscar Monzón and Ricardo Cases, he is a member of the Blank Paper collective.
- 5 *Almost There* by Aleix Plademunt was put out by the London publisher six months later.
- 6 If there is one book that has made the world wake up to the talent of the new generation of Spanish photographers, it is Cristina De Middel’s *The Afronauts* (2012), a self-published title that now changes hands for hundreds of pounds.



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forced to generate their own new structures: new exhibition venues, new publishers, new collectives, new schools," says Plademunt, and the results have been rewarding.

Michael Mack recalls a workshop he conducted with Paul Graham at the Fundación Marcelino Botín in Santander in northern Spain that was, in his words, "an extraordinary introduction to the work of Spanish photographers". He says "the wealth, strength and diversity in contemporary Spanish photography" correlates with this difficult economic and sociological period in Spain, and is reflected in the work of photographers such as Xoubanova and Cases. "The communities that have been built up due to the lack of state support have become extraordinary voices by supporting and pushing one another to work hard and be the best.

"It's very rare to see a phalanx of high-quality artists all coming from the same place," says Mack's founder. "The concept of emerging photographer is not about age; it's about talented photographers that have not yet had visibility." And for an author's voice to be heard, he says, "a published photobook is arguably the best platform". That's why, as a publisher, he is primarily interested in strong, conceptually driven bodies of work. "I really don't care if he or she is famous or unknown; it

has to be about the work," he says. "I judge them on the same grounds."

Mack is particularly impressed with Oscar Monzón's *Karma* (which was last year shortlisted for the First Book Award he set up in 2012, in search of the best dummies from unpublished photographers, before it went on to win the Paris Photo/Aperture Photobook Award in 2013), as well as the work of David Hornillos, De Middel, Xoubanova and other photographers who have been in the spotlight in the last couple of years.

One reason for the recent success of Spanish photography, he maintains, is collaboration. "Their strength definitely lies in the co-operatives; whether it's NoPhoto, Blank Paper or Ca l'Isidret Edicions, they really are supporting each other. This business is all about people."

Mack values the quality of book dummies, the layout, design and how they can coherently present ideas, and says most of the Spanish photographers he's met have been extraordinarily professional and "clear in their ability to present their portfolio, to translate their ideas into something solid - and that's very unusual".

De Middel emphasises the fact that there are many stages between conceiving a photographic project and authoring a photobook, being exhibited or having work acquired by a gallery. "It has to have a global interest, something that is not just local. You have to be very active, go

abroad, learn other languages, participate in as many portfolio reviews as possible, research the people you are contacting, and invest in your career. You cannot wait until you have the support of institutions." At the same time, she says there should be some sort of "greenhouse" system, where new talent can be cultivated, while acknowledging that the drought in previous years has produced a harvest of very valuable, albeit mostly underground, work.

Claude Bussac, the director of PhotoEspaña since 2006, has noticed an increased maturity in Spanish photography over the last 15 years, though she avoids making a comparison based on geographical origin. Part of that growth is represented both in the group exhibition *Photography 2.0* (which includes Monzón, Txema Salvans, Miguel Ángel Tornero, Daniel Mayrit, Olmo González, Albert Gosi, Fosi Vegue and Laia Abril), and the experiment in collaborative curating and authoring, *P2P* (Barón, Jon Uriarte, Jesús Madriñán, David Hornillos, Alberto Lizalde, Miren Pastor, Alejandro Marote, José Guerrero and Nicolás Combarro, among others).

She doesn't think there is a specific 'regard' in that roster of photographers, "because many of them already have a global approach, and the audience has also developed a global perception and taste". That is, in her opinion, the main difference with previous generations - and

can be seen in those exhibitions. "Fifteen years ago, these kind of group shows, where we can perceive similarities and cross references, would not have been possible." She admits that Spanish photographers have not historically been as well represented at PhotoEspaña as international authors, but says "the new generation are being nurtured with this festival".

The collectives

Arguably the most supportive and nurturing environment for young photographers in Spain is the collective - NoPhoto and latterly Blank Paper, which soon after forming in Madrid in 2006 set up its own school. The founder of the school, Fosi Vegue, sums up their experience as "a pedagogical project created by a group of demanding photographers who have tried to learn from previous generations and then do something different". As a school, Vegue says, "Blank Paper has had a close proximity with students, and the predominant tool in our courses has always been the growing collection of photobooks." Indeed, its influence is best seen in the highly conceptual approach to the editing of photobooks taken by its graduates.

Julián Barón, whose book *CENSURA* was nominated for the Paris Photo/Aperture Photobook Award, and whose latest series, *Tauromaquia*, is currently on show in *P2P* at

PhotoEspaña, runs the online training section of the school; he recently made a slideshow of 111 photographers for the Espacio Fundación Telefónica in Madrid, so he couldn't be more in sync with the critical discourse. "Of course, all the rejection and obscurity in recent years has a lot to do with Spanish society in general," he says. "The growth of alternative structures and networks has been organic, and for the first time it has been decentralised: other places like Valencia, Granada, Sevilla, Zaragoza, Huesca, the north... have been 'activated' after years of dominance by Madrid and Barcelona. But that regional scene is still rather underground."

Barón laments the lack of financial support for photographers and says Spain needs a sort of permanent laboratory for contemporary photography. "This is an unprecedented moment in Spanish photography, and we must keep working hard to present our views as authors."

Boutique photo agency Amparo, created by four photographers (Cases, Xoubanova, Plademunt and Monzón) who entrusted seasoned Spanish photo editor Amparo Escobedo, now based in London, with promoting their work as an agent focused on the international market, is a first for this new generation. Amparo, the agency, had major success with the Paris exhibition, *Regard sur la nouvelle scène photographique espagnole*, held last December at

Le Bal, which featured all four photographers. "Amparo was mainly Ricardo's [Cases] idea, shared by the other three," says Escobedo of the agency. "They needed to delegate the promotion, management and distribution of their work - talking to photo editors, gallerists, museums - so they could concentrate on taking pictures."

Escobedo is pleased that the photographers she represents are known outside Spain, in countries including the UK and France, and highlights the absurdity of seeing Spanish media shun emerging photographers "while publications such as *Time* or *Le Monde* are giving assignments to these same authors, with complete freedom, based on their personal style or an appreciation of their photobooks". Books have also become the new portfolios, she says, thanks to a new generation of "editors with a rich photographic culture and a passion" for fresh art/documentary narrative forms.

Sebastian Hau, one of the great champions of the contemporary photobook, who relocated from Cologne to Paris to manage the bookstore at Le Bal, having worked with Markus Schaden

Regard sur la nouvelle scène photographique espagnole, exhibited last December at Le Bal in Paris, was the first major show outside Spain recognising the new generation, featuring the work of Aleix Plademunt [black-and-white, image left], Oscar Monzón, Ricardo Cases [colour, image left] and Antonio Xoubanova [installation, picture right]. Images © Oscar Monzón



for eight years, notes some of the characteristics he has perceived in recent Spanish photobooks. "I see the presence of a social and political discourse addressing a Spanish audience, but at the same time Europe and the rest of the world. It's a type of photography that aims to move its readers." Asked about styles, he concedes that "many European photographers have tried to incorporate the strong use of flash that is characteristic of Martin Parr, but it's not easy to succeed in creating your own style. I see a metaphor in some works, as if some Spanish photographers had learned to use it in a more rich and imaginative way than Parr himself."

Talent-rich

Horacio Fernández, former art director at PhotoEspaña and a college professor and curator of Spanish and Latin American photobooks, says "the years 2009-2010 were crucial in the advent of this new wave of photography, with the maturity achieved by NoPhoto [founded in 2005] and Blank Paper [founded in 2006], *Fiesta Ediciones*, the first fanzines published by Cases, the birth of the first photobook clubs, and initiatives like the online bookstore and publisher Dalpine."

The crisis in Spain has been an important factor, but he says the main reason for this renaissance is pure talent. He mentions David Jiménez's *Infinito*, which was "a pioneering

work in regard to geometrical precision, poetry, interactivity and reader engagement." Jiménez is publishing his second book later this year, 14 years after *Infinito*. Fernández lists among the books that have set the tone and a standard of quality and artistic value in recent years the aforementioned *Paloma al aire*, *Karma*, *The Afronauts*, *CENSURA* and *Casa de Campo*, as well as *The Pigs* by Carlos Spottorno, winner of last year's Kassel Photobook Awards. "Each of those authors tells a story about their era, about their lives," says Fernández, whose 1999 *Fotografía Pública* is cited by Parr as a key influence on his own research into photobook history, in particular how they are presented in anthologies.

Fernández also highlights the importance of "graphic designers and art directors such as Jaime Narváez, Juanjo Justicia and Eloi Gimeno, who have had a deep engagement and complicity with the photographers".

Dalpine, founded in 2010 by Sonia Berger and José Manuel Suárez, has celebrated the diversity and richness of photobooks by selling hard-to-get international books in Spain, and books by Spanish authors abroad. "Traditional bookshops don't take risks when it comes to this genre of book, so we decided to make up for the lack of access," says Berger. Dalpine is an indie publisher, and after the critical success of *Karma*, co-published with RVB in France, it has just

launched *Mediodía* by Hornillos, and *YXXX* by Vegue. "To us it's like closing a circle, because we all met while studying at Blank Paper."

Dalpine has just finished the second edition of *Karma*, the first having run out in two months, thus circumventing the inevitable speculation that follows an award-winning and widely recommended photobook. "We didn't want prices to be inflated, and Oscar made it clear he wanted his book to be available to anyone interested," says Berger.

Another important player in the Spanish photography scene is the NoPhoto collective, which has spawned independent publishing house Phree, co-ordinated by photographer Juan Valbuena. Its catalogue includes Spottorno's political spoof *The Pigs*, which mimics *The Economist* in format, while its title refers to Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, the four southern Mediterranean countries whose near-economic collapse spread fear throughout the EU. You will also find a poignant, restrained series on memory, ellipsis and ETA violence by Eduardo Nave, *A la hora, en el lugar* [at the time, in the place], Jonás Bel's portrait of a typical Madrid bar, *El Palentino*, and Valbuena's own personal journey, *Noray*, as well as books that bring together photographers and writers such as *Dúo* by Nave and Valeria Saccone, and *Península* by Nave and Juan Millás.

"Our focus is on documentary photography, and we intend to limit the number of publications and recreate the press format while tackling subjects that are on the news but do not have an expiration date," explains Valbuena. "Among the upcoming books will be those devoted to the triple frontier in Campo de Gibraltar, the Basque country, the Opus Dei, Zara, house evictions and traffic accidents."

Can the independent, small-shop character contribute to the success of a photobook publisher? "Yes, if things are done little by little, with criteria," says Valbuena. "Dinosaurs are becoming extinct, and the small rodents are slowly taking their place. It's good that there are lots of new publishers around, but you need to have a certain level of specialisation." Valbuena would also like to see more diversification among the emergent generation of photographers.

Two young photographers doing just that are Laia Abril and Jesús Madriñán. The latter, a London-trained photographer from Galicia, will publish his first photobook this year, *Boas Noites*, based on large-format portraits that capture the stark contrast between the rural environment and youth culture. He has chosen Fabulatorio, a little-known studio created by two architects, as his first publisher.

At Rencontres d'Arles this month, Abril will present *Epilogue*, which Stockport-based

publisher Dewi Lewis will publish in September. It is, in a sense, a completion of a cycle about eating disorders that started with the multimedia piece *A Bad Day* and followed with her first publication in zine format, *Thinspiration*. In this case, the cinematic element plays an important part in the flashback narrative incorporated in the project. Abril, who has been working as a photo editor for Benetton's *Colors* magazine in Italy, has also done extensive work on the multiple intersections of sex and identity – a rare subject in her home country.

"I don't believe in the concept of 'Spanish photography', or any other geographical label," she explains. "I've always had great respect for the people I admired as a photojournalist, like Sandra Balcells, Txema Salvans, Gervasio Sánchez, Joan Colom, but I didn't feel much of a connection, maybe because I left Spain when I was quite young." Abril thinks "there's a generation in Spain that has succeeded in overcoming a certain insecurity, caused by the perceived lack of appreciation for homegrown talent. I would like to see a day when people get to know Spanish photobooks and authors without being aware of their origin," she says.

So what now? Valbuena and other photographers are worried about the chances of long-term survival in a time of scarcity. "The challenge is to create an environment where

this generation of photographers can become professionals, and for that we need gallerists, institutions, creative studios and the media to recognise talent and support it – it's the only way it'll remain economically viable." Right now, he says, "no one knows who will still be a photographer in five years' time".

Many photographers – documentary, art-inclined and everything in between – will have to learn new tricks in a constantly evolving environment. "There are stories that need a text, a radio soundbite, a book... and, being visual journalists, we can use a whole range of tools, depending on the subject and context," says Abril. "Appropriation and manipulation in photography have been around for ages. The challenge now is how to apply the tools at our disposal," she says.

When asked if there is any room for improvement in the context of Spanish contemporary photography, Michael Mack focuses on the fact that there is comparatively little visibility of female photographers. "A lot of the work I see is masculine. Perhaps it is reflecting on a very specific time in Spain." *BJP*

Fotografía 2.0, the Joan Fontcuberta curated show in Madrid, is one of three exhibitions devoted to the new contemporaries currently on show at PhotoEspaña. The picture on the left features *The Random Series* by Miguel Ángel Tornero, while the one on the right is Jon Uriarte's *CelebriMe* installation. Images © Jacobo Medrano

