Mareike Stoll
Weißensee School of Art and Design, Berlin, Germany

Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover: Aenne Biermann’s 60 Photos

Abstract: “A child’s hands” was chosen as the cover image for a monograph by photographer Aenne Biermann (1898–1933), published in Weimar Germany (1930) as part of a small series of paperback publications edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold. Volume 1 of the same series, also published in 1930, was dedicated to photography by László Moholy-Nagy, who in a different context had advocated for photographic literacy. Even though Biermann was published amongst the forerunners of the New Vision, as evidenced by her photobook 60 Photos, she had been forgotten for a long time. By calling attention to her photographic oeuvre, my essay poses questions about the mechanisms of writing photobook history (and which books are omitted from it). In the discourse surrounding the photobook, the child’s hand as depicted on the cover is viewed as a symbol of the activity that the photobook unleashes, both as a tangible object and as a thinking device. Biermann’s photo-constellations oscillate between training manual and atlas for seeing, between perception primer and picture book; they offer a surprisingly humorous complexity, taking full advantage of the photobook as a medium of artistic expression.

Keywords: Aenne Biermann; agency; atlas; hand; literacy; medium; photobook; photography; photographic literacy; Weimar Germany (1930).

Introduction

Aenne Biermann (1898–1933) was a self-taught German-Ashkenazi photographer in the Weimar Republic who published only one photobook. Even though she was exhibited and published amongst the forerunners of the New Vision, as evidenced by her photobook 60 Photos from 1930, she had been forgotten for many decades and only recently is being rediscovered. In the following I argue that the decision to use Biermann’s photograph of a child’s hands as the cover-illustration was to hint at her underlying educational program for photographic alphabetization as expressed by means of the photobook. In my reading, the book formulates a theory of the medium, and is exemplary for photobooks of the time in that respect. The hands of the child not

*Author contact information: stoll@kh-berlin.de; mstoll@alumni.princeton.edu
only allude to the scene of literacy and the context of knowledge acquisition, but they also stand in for the agency the medium warrants and requires.

To better understand why Biermann’s book was underestimated (or indeed misunderstood) by actors in the writing of photobook history this far, and why I argue for a rediscovery, let us first take a closer look at the cover (Fig. 1). The dove-blue dustjacket of the paperback publication is divided in two halves, a black and white photograph sits on top, and the lower half bears the name of the photographer in a white rectangle on the right, the letters echo the blue color chosen for the lower half of the cover. The photograph depicts the hands of a child, folded, resting on a notebook. Instantly, we begin reading what is written on the pages within the photograph: we find German words broken into syllables, “An=den=ken” (remembrance, souvenir, memory), and “zu=recht=fin=den” (to orient oneself). The picture shows a child’s handwriting exercises in a journal, while the child’s folded hands are placed on the empty space of the page yet to be filled with more handwriting. These closed hands are the antithesis to the movement of writing and reading and the turning of the page. The image on the cover however activates the beholder’s hands – so that they might open up the book, guided by curiosity to find out what the book contains. It thus establishes a connection, even an analogy between the scene of writing the photograph captures, ABC books or the primer for reading and writing, and the photobook. Thus, the two aspects of photographic literacy (the reading and the taking of images) come together here. Indeed, the hands are the agents of this activation and the locale of agency. Hence their depiction on the cover of Biermann’s photobook underscores the profundity of her claim. Simultaneously, the photograph suggests that the learning of photography as media competency might hold the key for a future where touch is placed at the center, complementing sight: the hand then becomes a thinking device, connecting eye, mind and body.¹ The book must be taken into the beholder’s hands and the photographic sequence thereby activated, much as the taking up of the camera allows for a more active participation in the production of photographic knowledge.

I will start the analysis by offering a short overview of the production details as well as introducing the author, before presenting several close readings that are aimed at illustrating just how intricate the dialogue is that Biermann constructs with her image constellations.

**Biermann’s Book in the Photobook Canon**

Biermann’s *60 Photos* was the second (and last) in what was supposed to be a long series of small paperback photobooks – entitled *Fototek* – edited by art historian and critic Franz Roh and designed by Jan Tschichold. The format was simple: 60 photographs by one author, presented on spreads of 30 pairs, designed by the highly talented Tschichold. These books were loosely modeled on the now iconic publication by

August Sander from 1929, *Antlitz der Zeit* (“Face of our Time”) which also contained 60 photographs, and which is, unlike Biermann’s book, still very much known today.

The time of publication of Roh’s and Tschichold’s photobook project *Fototek*, 1930, could not have looked better for a new series on photobooks – within quick succession publications like Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst* (“Art Forms in Nature”), August Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit* (“Face of our Time”), and Albert Renger-Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön* (“The World is Beautiful”) were published, all showcasing and promoting the German New Vision in photography, along with exhibitions (“*Film und Foto*” in Stuttgart, short “Fifo”). While Biermann’s work had been exhibited in the famous *FiFo* exhibition, in the catalogue that is now recognized as a photobook in its own right, *Foto-Auge* (Photo-Eye) her photographs were not included. For this book, published alongside the exhibition, Roh and Tschichold had already successfully collaborated. That Biermann’s photographs were omitted underscores the subtle mechanisms of selection when it comes to canonization of photo-history which would repeat themselves with the first wave of photobook-research, as Russet Lederman underscores: “Until recently, the history documented in the pioneering books-on-books anthologies either downplayed or excluded many photobooks by women.”

Roh and Tschichold however considered Biermann’s work publishable by dedicating a monograph to her photography, and it is about time to follow their lead by looking closely at what Biermann’s photographs offer. Alas, theirs would become one of those publication projects to remain fragmentary. While it started off with a coup – the editors had secured artist, theoretician and activist László Moholy-Nagy for the first volume which received quite a bit of attention – the editors had to discontinue the publication already after Volume 2, Aenne Biermann’s book, due to the upheavals in the political and publishing landscape in Germany at the time. That Volume 2 of the *Fototek* was dedicated to Biermann’s work shows how well-known she was at the time. It was still the exception for a female photographer to be published, even more so with her own photobook. While we now look back at the 1920s as the decade of female photographers who had taken to the new medium in large numbers, when it comes to the photobook as a highly respected medium of self-expression, there are very few publications by female photographers. Making a book was expensive then and is expensive now. You need(ed) connections and access. That is to say, the photobook publications that have been accepted into the canon are only stand-ins, as they do not mirror the numbers nor the talent of female practitioners. Proposing to look at one female author in the photobook landscape, also means to highlight the discourse and frameworks of production in which photobooks and their creators participate. This entails that books like Biermann’s still need to be unpacked in their potential, because they have not been marketed as prominently and they need to be inserted back into

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2 Ibid., 420–21.

3 For more on this see *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women, 1843–1999*, ed. by Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich (New York: 10x10 photobooks, 2021).
photobook history so that we can see photobook making (then and now) as the rich fabric it truly is, encompassing many different points of view. Recently, a few important exhibitions and publications have created a growing awareness of photobooks by women, and members of other marginalized groups. My article wants to contribute in calling attention to Biermann’s work.

The photobook market in the first years of the photobook boom (from 1999 onwards) was dominated by collectors and their books-on-books anthologies. Only recently more inclusive positions and comprehensive presentations of photobook production came into view that make available the rich history and texture of photobook production for contemporary beholders and correct this oversight. While Biermann’s photobook might not have appealed to the above-mentioned photobook-collector-clientele early on shaping the canon and the writing of photobook history, I propose that Biermann was quite consciously sending contradictory signals in order to undermine any quick assumptions one might have of a female photographer’s point of view. Even though Biermann’s book presents photographs of her children, of flowers and everyday objects which could be regarded as typically “feminine”, her 60 Photos is by no means as naïve as a first glance might suggest but instead – quite humorously – plays with the beholders’ expectations of an autodidact photographer/housewife. If we follow Biermann’s invitation to look closely beyond the obvious, with an eye trained in photographic literacy that is to say, the hands of the child suddenly symbolize her agency, and her capacity to design and create her own future (possibly as a “New Woman behind the Camera”). In my eyes, the cover photograph proposes exactly this: not to judge a book by its cover. The book then says: “I may look like child’s play but do not underestimate the importance of child’s play when it comes to photographic literacy!” Indeed, it encourages us to look closely and carefully and decipher the more profound concepts hidden inside the photographic constellations presented to us as children would: with their keen attentiveness and curious questions.


6 See for example The New Woman Behind the Camera, ed. by Andrea Nelson, Elisabeth Cronin (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2020); Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich, ed., What They Saw; and especially, Lederman, “Stand Up and Speak Out!,” who points out that this widening of perspective also importantly includes men, transgender and non-binary individuals: the formerly marginalized are now thankfully, slowly, (re)discovered.

7 Biermann’s book is included in a fairly long entry (by Carole Naggar) in What they saw (62–63), so the book clearly is recognized for its cultural importance, while the author does not mention the book’s particular investment in photographic literacy.

8 Often these were wealthy white men in their 60s, showing off their collection, naturally showcasing their idiosyncratic interest: namely Andrew Roth, Martin Parr/Gerry Badger, and Manfred Heiting, among others. See Lederman, “Stand Up and Speak Out!”, 414–16.

**Reading 60 Photos**

The first constellation of images in Biermann’s photobook is a respectful nod to Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst* and similar publications on the photography of plants (Fig. 2). The two photographs at the beginning of the sequence set the stage for the act of seeing that the book encourages. Practicing “comparative photography,” as Walter Benjamin would call it a year later with respect to August Sander’s portraits, Biermann invites the viewer to look closely and to also engage with (photo-) memories these images might evoke. A gum tree, or *ficus elastica*, as the caption says, is portrayed in close-up on the left; the right photograph gives us the detail of a conifer branch, set against a black background. The long soft leaves of the gum tree lushly bow downwards, and this motion is juxtaposed with the small bent forms in the photo on the right, the sharp ‘pins’ of the conifer that point upwards. The black background of the conifer further intensifies the contrast because the frame is filled up with the silky texture of the gum tree leaves on the left. The beholder, when examining this photographic pair, goes back and forth between the left and right side, and in a visual osmosis starts filling up the photograph on the right with the planes and surfaces of the photograph on the left. In the act of perception, the page becomes frame and image, and the spread ultimately turns into an image in itself.

The activation of the photobook was and is produced by the elements that constitute the medium, as we have seen in the example of Biermann’s spread: the spatial arrangement of photographs in the book, the placement of the plate number, caption (in three languages), and photograph on each page, and the space between or around the photographs, but also the sequence in its entirety. In this format, the photobook as a medium assigned agency to the viewer in a way that the other photographic genres (like cinema and photographs in newspapers) could not. Most importantly, it enabled the beholder to activate and pause the viewing process at their will, while simultaneously fixating images in pairs or in a photographic sequence on the printed page. This element of pause and activation, combined with an argumentative constellation of photographs as fixed in the sequencing, was crucial for the photobook and its impact, because the constellations of various elements in the photobook bring about an epistemological inquiry. Biermann’s photographic pair is exemplary of German photobooks of the 1920s and early 1930s insofar as it displays the tension that arises when two photographs are placed next to one another. This visual tension ultimately defines photobooks of the period.

In the context of contemporaneous debates around learning and knowledge acquisition in relation to photography, the photobook was meant as a means to acquire photographic literacy. Concerned with how to read images, and implicitly arguing that images hold a form of knowledge that might differ from one represented through language, Biermann and her contemporaries have called attention to the necessity,

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even urgency to think about how knowledge and the production and acquisition thereof might be tied to photography. Biermann’s photobook invites the beholder to playfully engage with the question of what happens when photographs are placed next to one another, and how photographic literacy might be acquired. This is particularly striking in the following example (Fig. 3).

The spread shows two eyes in close-up: one open and one closed. When looking at this double page, the eyes of the beholder move back and forth between the right and left photograph. Examining the open and closed eye, the beholders activate them with their gaze. These two photographs, similarly, activate the viewer’s own eyes by echoing the gesture of seeing, but also by evoking the shutter of the camera which produces the picture that is depicted in the photographs. Open and closed eye mimic human perception, but this page in Biermann’s photobook also separates the act of seeing into two units: it thus photographically introduces a pause. It fixates the otherwise unconscious act of blinking, turning it into a gaze that never tires and a closed eye that will never open again. The immobility of the photograph thus produced has a mobilizing effect on the beholder, however, as the beholder’s gaze goes back and forth between the two eyes, opening and closing both photographically fixed, static eyes. The space surrounding the two photos accentuates the horizontal connectedness in their placement on the spread, as they form one image pair. We see the open left eye on the right, the closed right eye on the left, thus constructing a face in reverse. The eye is here presented as constructed, and projecting and recording, as “looking at” and “being-looked at”; Biermann’s close-up is thus tied to the method of double-projection in German art history.11 These two photographs of the human eye pull the viewer consciously into the act of perception, construction, perspective, and reproduction. The eyes are placed in such a way that they appear literally connected, almost glued together, to form one image. The spread would have an entirely different effect if there were space between the two photos. The mise-en-page, the arrangement of the photograph on the page and the space surrounding it are the underlying principles of every photobook of the 1920s. They create the rhythm of seeing. Throughout the book, Biermann plays with visual similarities and unlikely pairings, precisely provoking a conceptualizing of the photographic pair: we tend to find connections, also on the level of language.

Early in the image sequence Biermann presents a pair of photographs with an opened egg on the left, and the folded hands of a child on the right (Fig. 4). Recognizably it is the cover photograph. In the photograph on the left, the perfectly broken white egg contains the yolk, and the empty shell on the right-hand side of the frame completes this still life. In both upper and bottom shells light is captured and mirrored, which turns both forms into positive and negative shapes. Moreover, they suggest the hands that broke the egg to create this image, while the photograph on the right shows us hands resting from the act of writing. In this photographic pair,

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movement has taken place before the photograph was taken, that way the passing of time is captured. Handwriting and the act of reading are implied, as is the idea of reproduction (in the metaphor of the positive and negative forms, container and empty shell, as much as in the hands of a child, and the reproductive techniques of writing and reading as copying and re-producing). The egg furthermore humorously evokes the question of origin, namely implying the proverbial hen (or photographer and mother, Aenne Biermann) and the egg (the daughter photographed). Questions of (photo-) reproduction and a history of vision are addressed, as tied to techniques of writing, reading, and perception at large. This raises the question of knowledge and knowledge production, and how photography relates to both. How are two photographs in a constellation connected? Why are they placed next to each other and how do they start speaking to each other (Fig. 5)?

The hand allows us to literally ‘grasp’ photography. Importantly, the hand is connected to doubt and skepticism, all relating to Hegel’s Begriff, as Rachel Aumiller has recently argued. While the eyes immediately seek out similarities and differences, in the case of the photobook the hand helps us understand what we see in a more bodily way, relating to the book, because the hands are the connector between tactile perception and intellectual comprehension, and between writing and reading. Much like the taking apart of the positive and the negative, of egg white and egg yolk, we construct photographic meaning. By closing the book, the two halves of the egg might be united again, the folded hands of the child suggest.

Biermann’s book has recently been made accessible again for contemporary beholders in a reasonably priced facsimile-paperback edition in English, German and French (supplemented with an afterword by the editor Hans-Michael Koetzle), following the format of the original edition. The reprint pays tribute to the wider market of the photobook-interested public. It also highlights the material context of photobook publications from the 1920s and 1930s, however. Biermann’s paperback photobook from 1930 was not printed in high-quality clothbound editions as were some of her peer’s books (Urformen der Kunst and Die Welt ist schön, for example, had several collector’s editions and various price ranges already at the time of its first publication). While the reasons for the publication’s format might depend on a variety of factors, the material form of a book always destines the book’s survival – or indeed its disappearance – this is true also for Biermann’s book. In the rare book sections of libraries, private collections, and some museums, the materially speaking ‘frail’ books mostly are literally out of reach for a wider public until they are rediscovered (and reprinted). Contemporary editions allow scholars, and anyone else interested, to access these books and insert them back into the history of photobooks as ‘schools for seeing’ to be experienced by hand. My argument is precisely that we need to handle the books to truly understand them.

Conclusion: Biermann’s 60 Photos as a Theory of the Photobook

In the 1920s, and again with the scholarly rediscovery of the photobook over the course of the past 20 years, the photobook is embedded in a theory of photography. The underlying assumption in my statement is the following: that the photobook always also offers a theory of photography. A theory of photography, that is, which regards the photobook as a perception primer or Übungsatlas, as Walter Benjamin aptly wrote, to practice the reading of the sequential, serial, material, medium-specific and contextual (and thus inherently invisible) aspects of the photograph, and a literacy of and for photography. In this lies the poietic potential of the photobook as an art form.

The handling of the photobook, the engagement of visual capacities, touch, time, and the relation to the body and to the idiosyncratic memory of the beholder, and the photographs’ relation to language and other forms of framing: all these constitute the pedagogical, even political dimensions of the modernist German photobook of the 1920s and early 1930s. The photobook is precisely situated historically in a place between cinema, newspapers and illustrated magazines, and the photo essay in exhibitions – and it was conceptualized as relating to these forms while remaining simultaneously distinctly different and with a different purpose: to be studied at home, becoming a collector’s and bibliophile’s item over time. As a medium the photobook also allows the permanent storage of a sequence of photographs; it frames photos on the page with text and layout design. Most importantly, it enables the beholder to activate and pause the viewing process at their will, while simultaneously fixing images in a photographic sequence on the printed page.

While texts had been illuminated already in the Middle Ages, and acts of reading for a long time have meant the reading and seeing of various image-like elements on the page, things changed dramatically when photographically reproduced images entered the scene. Photography ‘on the page’ in the 1920s suggests a different kind of literacy that is tied to a picture that has been made by a camera, thus promising objectivity and a particular relationship to time (and history) to an extraordinary degree. Photographic literacy implies the knowledge of the image in these dimensions (those of time, history, and so-called objectivity), as much as the understanding of the construction of this image, the technique and technology behind it.

Biermann’s book thus serves as a perception primer also in political visual education, and should from here onwards, I argue, be placed alongside Aby Warburg’s famously fragmentary book-project Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, come to us only as photographs (and reconstructed panels), and now canonical photobooks from the same time. Biermann’s book makes the case for the productive capacity of photography as an educational tool to encourage attentive slow reading and close reading of images, inspired by the attentiveness of a child learning to read and write. This call for media competency in the context of increasing image manipulation for political purposes

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14 Benjamin, GS 2.1, 368–85.
bears resemblance to our current age of image-saturated information politics, and tries to argue for complex or even complicated, ambivalent and often labor-intensive readings instead of quick and readymade, one-size-fits-all answers to be grasped in a few seconds (Fig. 6).

Avant-garde photobooks in the 1920s and early 1930s work with an activated space between the photographs to slow down the perception of photography, consequently, rearrange and reassemble certain notions or concepts associated with photography by placing the photographs in a (bound) sequence to create connections, correspondences, sometimes frictions, and thus, in short, interrupt or even disrupt a certain discourse. In this article, I propose that the child’s hands might stand in for the photobook as a whole, even photobooks in general: we need to look closely and attentively in order to find what is hidden inside; photography is not at all understood in the blink of an eye but in its ambivalence instead needs unpacking; the hands help the mind and eye in this grasping of the content. It is through the physical handling of the book that its potential is actualized and set into motion, and it is thus that the beholder is mobilized in an act of expanded perception. The space between the photographs and the particular spatial arrangement, in dialogue with the material choices and design, create the specific meaning that goes beyond the photographic content.

Biermann plays with this understanding of the photobook when she emphasizes the hand of the beholder by the choice of cover illustration. That she furthermore uses the hands of a child underscores the notion of the school for seeing that the photobook embodies, not only by the time of its publication, but still to this day. In the only text that was published by her during her lifetime, a short two-page statement on the use of photography in the classroom, Biermann encouraged teachers to use a camera to instill confidence in their little students: the camera, she argued, would allow children to see the world differently and give them the pleasure of creating images without first having to master the skill of creating a photorealist image by pencil and hand. Biermann imagined how the use of photography could change how they saw the world, and how the knowledge of photography and the confidence in creating images could enable them to become agents of their future: to think critically, to deconstruct and in a more productive sense reconstruct our world is what is at stake in learning to read and write photography, that is. To see and to capture the world, to describe it, to grasp it, to be part of it and express themselves, all this is part and parcel of the photographic practice. Proposing a deep connection to touch, the call to creative photography and for children to pick up the camera thus also grounds the modernist infatuation for the dominance of vision in a more embodied, connected, corporeal reality.

So why was Biermann’s book forgotten for so long? The reasons are manifold. The material context (the fate of the Fototek-series) was one of them, another was her untimely death in 1933 and the political upheavals in Germany that drove her family

into exile and her photographic legacy into oblivion, because by Nazi logics she was deemed Jewish (and much of her negatives were lost in a shipment to Palestine). The cover-motif might also play a role: it needs some unpacking in order not to be mistaken for “kids’ stuff”. Uncovering her photobook in its humorous complexity, I argue, allows us to also reinsert her into the writing of photobook history and recognize her thoughtful contribution to the efforts of photographic literacy in form of the photobook. What we learn, in other words, when we start reading Biermann’s book, is this: that we should not underestimate those points of view in photography that have thus far been marginalized, sidelined and thus often forgotten; it is these points of view that offer new ways of seeing and we are all the richer if we get to see what they capture. This is indeed a political claim for agency and participation.

In the discourse surrounding the photobook, the child’s hand as depicted on the cover is a symbol for the activity that the photobook unleashes, both as a tangible object and as a thinking device. Biermann’s photo constellations oscillate between training manual and atlas for seeing, between perception primer and picturebook; they offer a surprisingly humorous complexity, taking full advantage of the photobook as medium of artistic expression. Much like the “New Woman” behind the camera, the child’s hands are thus posited as constructive part in playfully building a slightly different future. What is more, the book urges us to draw our own conclusions and think critically about what we see. It also encourages us to rethink photobook research in this way, still today.

References


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Figure 1: Aenne Biermann, cover from *60 Photos*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Verlag, 1930.

Figure 2: Aenne Biermann, double spread, pp. 1/2 from *60 Photos*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Verlag, 1930.
Figure 3: Aenne Biermann, spread, pp. 47/48 from *60 Photos*, 1930.

Figure 4: Aenne Biermann, *60 Photos*, pp. 9/10 from *60 Photos*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Verlag, 1930.
Figure 5: Aenne Biermann, double spread, pp. 8/9 from *60 Photos*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Verlag, 1930.

Figure 6: Aenne Biermann, *60 Photos*, pp. 41/42 from *60 Photos*, Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Verlag, 1930.