

# Do it yourself

**Bruno Ceschel**, founder of the company Self Publish, Be Happy, discusses why many photographers are taking the route of self-publishing. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

**MAKING** your own photography book is not a new idea, although you could be forgiven for assuming they are. In the past few years these do-it-yourself treasures have become all the rage in photographic circles. As home-based publishing software becomes more affordable and user-friendly, many photographers are taking matters into their own hands and producing beautifully crafted volumes.

While this is a relatively new movement in the UK, there is a long tradition of self-published photo books in Japan. Last

year, The Photographers' Gallery in London held an exhibition where visitors were free to handle some of the most significant photo books from Japan's notable photographers. Around the same time, London's Tate Modern held an exhibition of Daido Moriyama's work, a photographer who has produced some of today's most sought-after photo books. The gallery even went as far as to invite visitors to a

one-off workshop where Moriyama showed them how to put together a photo book using some of his images.

In 2010, the UK self-publishing industry saw the birth of Self Publish, Be Happy (SPBH), a company founded by writer and academic Bruno Ceschel. 'I used to work for the traditional publishing trade and often I would become frustrated with the limitations,' Bruno explains. 'I wasn't able to work on the kinds of books that really interested me. I ended up leaving publishing and moved to New York, during which time I did







some research for the Brooklyn Museum. It was then that I came across many publications made by artists. They had an energy about them that was unlike anything in the standard trade.'

What was missing was a way to get those publications to buyers. At that time (unlike now), bookshops were not stocking self-published books, meaning there were only very limited ways for these publications to circulate. It was with this in mind that Bruno set up SPBH, a web presence that was designed simply to build awareness of self-published books. His plan was simple: 'To celebrate, study and promote self-published books,' he says. Now the company holds various exhibitions, displays, talks, workshops, publications and a website, although this not unique to SPBH. More self-publishing websites and exhibitions are appearing throughout the country.

Since 2010, the interest in DIY bookmaking has risen significantly. Bookshops now exist that deal exclusively in self-published works and some art fairs feature them as major parts of their line-up. 'Our view of self-publishing in the west is definitely changing,' says Bruno. 'Technology is finally giving people the opportunity to make books in their own homes. A large number of books are created digitally, although some are hand-made. The fact is, much of the technology that people are using to create books in their homes is the same technology used by major publishers. These advances have given people options they didn't have before.'

**A CHANGING INDUSTRY**

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this mini-revolution is how it fits into the supposed death-knell of print publishing.

A recent article in *Colors* magazine (where Bruno worked during his time in the US) declared print journalism to be America's fastest-shrinking industry. Yet within this, the kernel of self-publishing and indie publishing are burgeoning.

'Self-publishing and smaller indie publishers are forcing the industry to take notice,' says Bruno. 'Larger organisations are looking at the ways they can adapt to this increasingly alien landscape they're finding themselves in. A lot of the companies that assist photographers in self-publishing are never going to produce huge retrospective 400-page tomes. For that, you need an editor and a lot of money. You could argue that larger publishers are increasingly giving up on producing monographs because indie publishers can do it better. Smaller companies, such as SPBH, Dewi Lewis and GOST, don't have the kinds of restrictions that traditional publishers have.'

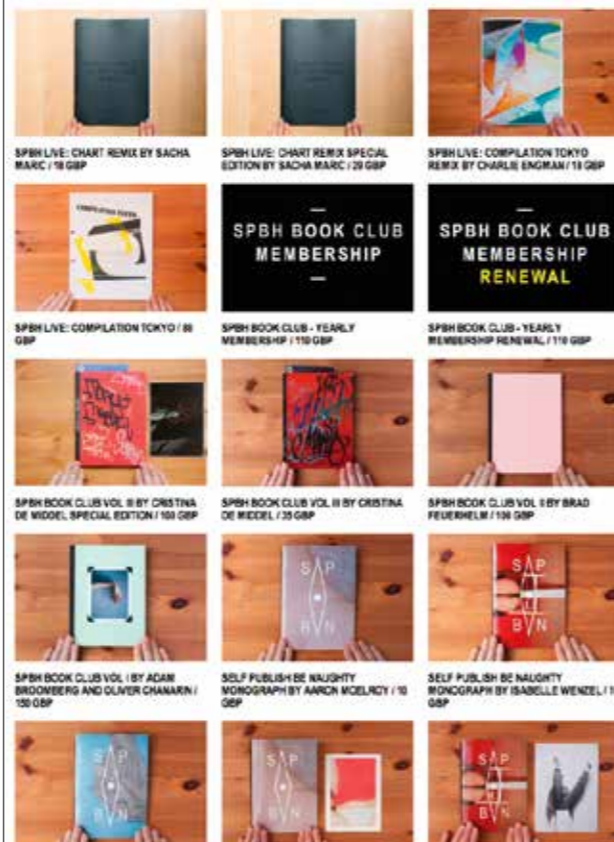
The restrictions that Bruno is referring to are the kind of demands that a publisher will make upon a book's production – material, distribution, a particular image on the cover, size and price. While this is a model that has worked for a publisher such as Taschen, this can perhaps result in reducing the freedom of a photographer and the control they have over their book.

'This kind of thing really extends to the magazine industry, too,' says Bruno. 'What's interesting at the moment is the fact that a lot of magazines seem to be becoming more like books. The way they are being produced suggests the desire to archive. I suppose it's why a lot of magazines have undergone redesigns recently.'

'If people want instant satisfaction for information, they'll go online,' adds Bruno. 'With these redesigned magazines it's more

**Above: Part of the joy of self-published books is in the craftsmanship that goes into constructing them**

**Below: A small selection of books on SPBH**



of a long-term commitment. They've almost become luxury items to keep up with the smaller, more limited-run independent magazines that people like to collect.'

**LITTLE ARTEFACTS**

As the world seems to be moving further into the realms of the digital landscape, it seems strange that people would find themselves moving towards collecting

**Cristina De Middel's SPBH Book Club Vol III is now highly collectible**

self-published books. It's perhaps the same thinking that drives people to collect vinyl. It's not simply a case of nostalgia. It's about physically engaging with the product; it's the look, the feel and the design. But this doesn't mean that you have to choose one or the other. Digital and print can work together in tandem.

'I lecture at the University of the Arts in London and some of my students are 19 or 20 years old,' says Bruno. 'They've grown up in a digital world and used things like MySpace, Facebook and Tumblr. With those platforms you adapt to the idea of sharing, particularly with images. But that doesn't prevent them from thinking of their images in a different context, and by that I mean a physical form. Creating a book or a magazine is not a rejection of digital.'

One of the most appealing aspects of a self-published book is actually in its imperfections. It's a crucial facet of the design, meaning that each book is unique in its own way. 'A lot of self-published books dwell on the imperfections and limitations, whether that's a result of the

technology, craft or the limited economy of the photographer,' says Bruno. 'The fact that you perhaps can't print on nice paper is compensated for by other things, such as the feel when you hold it or the fact that it feels very crafted. Some of them have beautiful screen-printed images. On others, such as Cristina De Middel's much sought-after book (left), the cover has actually been tagged by a street artist to fit in with the theme of gangs within the book. They used the cover as if were a wall on the street. Therefore, each cover is unique to that copy. I find things like that so rewarding.'

**ALL IN THE CONTENT**

Self-publishing is becoming more and more simple in terms of getting your project off the ground. For example, SPBH simply asks that you send a copy of your book directly to the company. If they like it, they'll publish it. With other sites such as Blurb, it's simply a matter of following the instructions on screen and putting the book together in that way. 'From very early on, we decided we wanted to see the product in front of us,' Bruno explains. 'We have to see and touch it in order to make a decision. Every so often, we'll sit down at a table covered with books and go through and discuss each one.'

It may sound like an obvious thing to say but, in Bruno's opinion, people can tend to get a little too hung up on the book as an object. 'It's all about the content,' he says. 'The images still have to be strong. Are these images striking enough to warrant their own book? Personally, I'm a fan of projects that are somewhat open-ended; ones that don't necessarily tell you how it should be read. I'm also intrigued by the craft of bookmaking. What material did they use? How big is it? What typography have they selected? It's all very exciting for me.'

Publishing is entering a phase of uncertainty but rather than conceding to defeat, many photographers are seeing it as an opportunity to explore fresh business models. The rise of self-publishing points towards the kind of do-it-yourself fanzine-culture that was so prevalent during the UK's '70s punk scene. All you needed then was a few sheets of A4, a pen and some glue. These days all you need is a laptop, a camera and the confidence in your own ability. It's an exciting time to be a photographer. **AP**



**A spread from Cristina De Middel's SPBH Book Club Vol III**

**THE GOOD AND THE BAD**

**THERE** are many ups and downs to making a photo book, as Bruno explains: 'It's a pleasure making a photo book,' he says. 'We started SPBH because we wanted to share the enjoyment. It's fine if you want to make a book just to promote your work, but you need to be drawn by the idea. Imagine your photographs in book form. You need to feel the excitement. But then you have to be excited by the idea of a potentially difficult journey. We've worked with some photographers who are obsessive. One of them actually went to the binding factory. Most photographers are satisfied visiting the press.'

'Publishing a photo book also gives you control over how people receive and circulate your work. They'll take it home, enjoy it and show it to people.'

'However, like any venture, there are potential difficulties along the way. The economic side is something you need to be careful about. With anything more than a zine, you're looking at more than £1,000. It's not just the printing. It's also things like the design.'

'Some books are a success, but for every success there's a failure. Sometimes a book will arrive that really works, but for one reason or another it isn't successful. Perhaps it just isn't the right time for it.'

'The other thing to remember is that making a book is just a small fraction of the work. Once the book exists, what are you going to do with it? You need to send it to magazines and publishers. Sell it and sell yourself.'



**ONLINE DIY PUBLISHERS**

**Blurb** [www.blurb.co.uk](http://www.blurb.co.uk)

Blurb is one of the most popular choices for creating a photo book and offers a user-friendly service. Books can be created either online or via a downloadable program.

**Photobox** [www.photobox.co.uk](http://www.photobox.co.uk)

Photobox is a straightforward way of putting your book together using online software.

**Bonusprint** [www.bonusprint.co.uk](http://www.bonusprint.co.uk)

Bonusprint books use heavy, photo-quality paper and each of its books is affordably priced.

**Loxley** [www.loxleycolour.com](http://www.loxleycolour.com)

Loxley is considered one of the best makers of photo books and is therefore a very popular choice. The company's software is downloadable so you can work on designs on your home computer.

**Kickstarter** [www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com)

If your concern is that you lack the funds to put together a high-quality book yourself, you can always try your luck with crowd funding. Turn to pages 22-23 of this issue for more details.