

“The photobook is the perfect format to satisfy my motivation for photography: owning and being responsible for the work from the original idea to presentation.”

Andras Ikladi

First Camera:

Nikon F75

First meaningful photobook:

The Images of Chang Chao-Tang,
1959-2013

Andras Ikladi (born in Szentes, Hungary, 1978) gradually transitioned to photography around 2015-2016 after a 2-decades long career as a visual effects artist working on large-screen Hollywood productions, garnering a selection of both professional and broader film industry awards. His work could be described as “subjective documentary”: using tools and approaches of the documentary tradition to build an initial set of photographs, later adding layers of personal meaning and interpretation in edit and his preferred presentation format: the photobook. His published works include five short-run books (*Blackout*, *Crows Nest*, *Undercurrents*, *Ukiyo: The floating world and Incubus*). Andras lives and works in Xiamen, South China.

First meaningful exhibition:

Roger Ballen's Asylum of the Birds
at CAFAM (798, Beijing)

Personal fact:

If I was born again, I would wish to be
living in the 1920s Paris

1. What comes first for you: the idea for a project, or individual photographs that suggest a concept?

It's a bit of a mystery what catches our interest. My process is akin to a narrowing cycle from serendipity to intellectual consciousness. The initial spark is followed by an intense period of picture-taking when the reward of surprises and lucky finds outweighs the overall progress towards a more refined expression.

For the first hint of "needing" to photograph, inspiration might come from an interest in a different visual style and lucking out on appropriate content. The signal might also arrive from a more mature previous project, which has probably been contained, and ideas to investigate are falling out around the edges.

A project is born without forcing myself to intellectualise it. The pace of narrowing the definition is of crucial importance. Too fast, and the project suffocates; too slow, and coherence suffers after too much work has been invested, and the ship is hard to steer. Tighter cycles work better at this stage of my development; loose projects with undefined scope and timeframe might never see completion.

Once with a more precise idea, I would head out again and find more pictures to fill the gaps and elaborate on the initial concept. Still, the new images redefine the project more often than not, and the meaning shifts until the last edit in a narrowing circle. A new project might also get spawned if the dichotomy persists and both forms of expression are strong enough to stand independently.

I relate this discovery process to my preferred way of travel: feel the burn, get on my motorcycle with the general idea of heading from A to B and let the route work itself out as obstacles are experienced. Pre-planning, to me, is stifling and the studio, with empty backdrops, is a scary place.

2. What are the key elements that must be present for you when you are creating a body of work? (Social commentary, strong form, personal connection, photographic reference...)

No artistic work or process starts without personal motivation, which can arrive from a childhood memory, longing for a past or visual stimulation and influence from one of my photography heroes and other art forms.

I want the visual poetics of the image to work in loose service of the subject at hand. I then personalise the gathered material with more layers of meaning by pairing, ordering and pacing to create a third/ fourth effect in my sequence, creating space for the audience to read between the lines to create their own version of meaning.

3. Is the idea of a body of work important to you? How does it function in relation to making a great individual photograph?

Extremely. To the point that I never take "random" photographs anymore that fall outside the current understanding of my (consciously initiated) bodies of work.

It's a kind of sickness. Sometimes I want to experience enjoying taking individual photographs, but I cannot stop thinking about the ongoing projects and consider it wasted time and focus. A dangerous state of mind that can be stifling to the practice. My way of working around it is to run multiple projects at once. Occasionally the shoot produces pictures for 2-3 different bodies of work - a balancing act.

Sometimes I run ahead a little too fast and end up with valuable photographs that do not fit any body of work. This regularly happens at certain stages of the work, but it's more of a telling sign of the ship turning and new interest arising.

Even for someone focusing on bodies of work and photobook-based curation, great individual images are necessary to build the project's scaffolding and act as doors for the audience to enter a more complex world.

Thinking in the framework of projects and bodies of work has a few welcome side effects on my process. They create the drive and satisfaction of seeing the work grow and help maintain structure, allowing planning of my time. A sense of closure is craved near completion, probably a remnant of my film industry days where the “deadline” and “milestones” were untouchable with set release dates of movies.

A finished project also acts as a checkpoint in the artistic career. A book can stand alone and be left alone, removing the burden of explanation and handing over the project for consumption. The stack of books also serves as a lookout while the new work is created, providing the experience of the recurring cycle from idea to conclusion.

Lastly, I believe more complex artistic products are necessary to fight the deflationary forces of photography’s democratisation (commoditisation). A single “great shot” will not emerge from the noise, and a thousand words is a limited way of expressing complex ideas.

4. Do you have what you might call a “photographic style”?

It’s not a particular concern for me to work in a consistent, recognisable style when it comes to the output, but instead find a fitting language of expression for each idea I pursue.

Once the approach is settled, however, it’s of utmost importance to maintain coherence and unity in the project - which occasionally falls over and becomes a little dogmatic for tough editing decisions to tackle.

Every artist was influenced by their masters and heroes and education. Ralph Gibson’s strong sense of composition and predominantly vertical framing (and his love for the book) had an effect early on.

But then, on the opposite side, I also brought influences from the silver screen, occasionally using wide panoramic formats and large-scale landscape books. Two complete opposites, but I don’t see (or indeed care) about the apparent discrepancy.

5. Where would you say your style falls on a continuum between completely intuitive and intellectually formulated?

For most artists, this has to fall on the intuitive side, at least for our initial influences. Eventually, working practices and personal ways of seeing allow convergence to a specific style, but while working, this better remains an intuitive process that can only be observed intellectually once there is enough distance to the work, either when thinking about cohesion within the project or retrospectively, in the edit.

Actively and explicitly striving to find and/or build a style might appeal to collectors and other entities in the business of categorising and marketing work. Still, I consider it a dishonest effort with questionable motivation that carries the chance of becoming a dead-end.

6. Assuming you now shoot in what you would consider your natural voice, have you ever wished your voice was different?

In filmmaking, all participants must work towards a common goal and speak the language of the director and the movie. One of my motivations for getting into photography was seeking personal authorship and owning the process from idea to presentation.

Of course, like every artist, I still refer to some of my heroes for inspiration - but I never really wished I would be them. Life circumstances and the project at hand both render this tendency counterproductive, so I naturally end up with what I think is my natural voice. Entering the field later in my life with more varied life experiences likely contributed to this commitment.

However, since I’m still early on my artistic path and without significant recognition, I also enjoy and maintain the freedom to investigate my natural voice, adapting it to the project intuitively and in the technical approach and selection of tools.

In the end, I might end up with multiple natural voices - but hopefully not with someone else’s.

7. How do you know when a body of work is finished?

A body of work has a natural lifespan; the shooting stage ends when the subject matter is exhausted. Or I'm exhausted, lose interest and focus changes to something else. The telling sign: what I bring back feels boring and repetitive, and I eventually do not even get to packing the bag and walking out to shoot. Life situation also changes, and access often goes away.

I also push myself to finish a book or zine for the project, as unfinished projects pollute the following one if not properly closed. One of the reasons for my preference for this way of presenting is that I consider it more final than anything else, and thus provides a stronger sense of closure.

It's crucial to define projects with the proper scope. Broad enough to allow for exploration but narrow enough to be concluded in the foreseeable future.

8. Have you ever had a body of work that was created in the editing process?

If you mean discovering entirely new projects in the edit, I've done that.

In the case of Blackout, not only the project but I wasn't conscious either...if you know what I mean. The panoramas that constitute Crows Nest were collected for no good reason on my motorcycle travels and, many years later, found their purpose.

Trying to find projects in edit carries a significant danger: often, there is no way to go back and add to that imagery, which you only realise after investing substantial work in defining and editing the new-found project, maybe to the point of no return.

But then, most of my projects are born in the edit, even if on the fly: working along on a body of work, I find more and more images that start to diverge from the original subject, signalling the birth of a new project, which needs to be clarified and elaborated early enough. Research, eventually evolving into concise writing, early edits, pairs, clusters and mini-sequences or collecting a selection of core images in contact sheets all serve this goal. I often culminate these materials in what I call "field

guides" - a cheaply produced, non-precious print-on-demand magazine that allows accessing the material for review and peer discussion.

When the shooting stage is concluded, the real work begins. The effort shifts to editing and, eventually, layout and design to create new layers of meaning. Photographing in the field is like making love, but the labour pains belong to editing.

9. Do you associate your work with a particular genre? If yes, how would you define that genre?

Not really. Like style, the genre is for other parties interested in categorisation to determine.

If I were pressed, however, I would borrow from the Hungarian photographic terminology and loosely identify with the "subjective documentary" genre: a concoction akin to, yet different from Walker Evans' definition of "lyrical documentary". I feel the word lyrical (as opposed to a prosaic description of what's in front of the lens) carries relevance to my work, but our practices, when it comes to creating more subjective layers, are different.

"Documentary" has as many definitions as practitioners associated with this genre. The meaning ranges from a way of working and collecting images from the real world, which is certainly my way of creating work. I'm entirely dependent on the external subject matter and cannot contrive my work on an empty canvas - or else I would prefer to be a painter. This way, I work in the "documentary style", and in particular projects, even the visual style of the imagery came from this tradition: black and white silver prints of a small-format, grainy negative dominated this way of seeing for almost a century.

"Subjective" affords a loose definition without the commitment and false promise of "documentary truth", allowing personal content to be layered on during the editing process, creating a body of work "on" a subject rather than "of" one with enough space for a slight surrealist bent.

Even the visual style shifts with this genre's flavour, underlining the work's illustrative (as opposed to descriptive) nature: the horizontal storytelling format gives way to a dominance of vertical compositions

or stretched panoramic framing, achieving perhaps more of an abstract expression.

I find the Japanese “snapshot style”, with its often surreal imagery, preference for working in large, loosely connected bodies of work and focus on the photobook, are closest to my approach or at least aspirations but also feature a distinctly different visual flavour.

10. Do you ever revisit a series that has been already exhibited or published to shoot more and add to it?

The book is a relatively definitive closure of the project, so my honest answer is: no.

Also, opportunities, access, internal focus and passion shift. There are many other areas to explore than toil away on a project with diminishing returns. Better move on in life into another creation cycle and carry over experiences and conclusions to make the new work naturally more expressive.

But what happened before is what I considered adding images to a body of work singled the birth of a new project: similar visual style, entirely different content.

11. Do you ever revisit a series that has been already exhibited or published and *reedit* it?

I might but haven't been many examples so far - primarily focusing on moving forward and exploring new ideas instead of looking into the rearview mirror.

In fact, after deciding that a body of work is “done”, I might even stop myself from taking an image since a project was concluded and better not stir up an already settled edit.

A sequence takes enormous time and effort to settle. Akin to a house of cards, adding or removing a single picture can see the whole thing collapsing. The construction might be arbitrary, but attempting to repair one takes as much as building a new one from the ground up and is better approached as such, probably under the supervision of the

second pair of eyes of an editor.

In other areas of the authoring process, there were situations where I couldn't fulfil my vision due to the limitation of print-on-demand book production or rushing into adding text that wasn't as mature as the rest of the work. On the positive side, print-on-demand also allows one to see the work in a final form and do minor touch-ups without regrets and commitment to an edition of 2000.

12. Do you create with presentation in mind, be that a gallery show or a book?

The photobook is the perfect format to satisfy my motivation for photography: owning and being responsible for the work from the original idea to presentation. The concept of the book grows organically along the project. Around halfway through shooting, I have a decent idea of the final form. By then, I had done the research, more concise writing, post-processing experiments, and played with design and typographic ideas in my “field guides”.

There is a need for balance: settling on something prematurely might stifle the shooting process, and it's better not to think about presentation when out in the field. To paraphrase Cartier-Bresson, analyse before and after the shoot, and work intuitively with the camera.

Allowing the content to develop intuitively will inform the format, and even pre-conceived notions of presentation are uprooted and forced to be reinvestigated.