
In recent years, contact sheets have received increased attention through an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “A Few Frames: Photography and the Contact Sheet” (2009-2010), and a recent publication and exhibition of Magnum photographers’ contact sheets (Magnum Contact Sheets, 2011). Much like an artist’s sketchbook, the contact sheet is a glimpse into the working practice of a photographer, and is similarly relegated to a surprisingly limited number of topical publications and exhibitions, and more commonly an adjunct of single-artist surveys. Steve Crist’s The Contact Sheet adds to this growing area of research, and is the broadest survey of this topic.

Crist’s book contextualizes famous photographs as a single frame within a series of exposures. Arranged alphabetically, the author features forty-four photographers with brief quadrilingual (English, French, German, and Spanish) biographical sketches, a significant image, and the contact sheet that includes the selected photograph. The artists featured are a varied range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic, journalistic, and editorial photographers. Only a few photographs are iconic world-famous images, such as Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother.” Others depict famed subjects, including Marilyn Monroe by Elliott Erwitt, or the Stahl House photographed by Julius Shulman.

The text accompanying each photograph is succinctly written. In addition to a brief biography, Crist describes the specific work featured in the book, including a direct quote from the photographer. The quotes are illuminating, but their lack of citation is troubling. Only three are acknowledged as being excerpted from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is noted on the credit page, rather than in the text, and it is difficult to discern whether a photographer spoke directly with the author or was quoted from an otherwise unidentified source. For a student or scholar interested in a particular artist’s quote, it may become challenging to identify which other quotes came from alternative sources. There is no bibliography.

The book’s most distressing problem is its layout, which frequently printed into the gutter to make two-page spreads. In some cases, like George Georgiou’s Kosovo wedding portrait, the bride is placed in the center of the composition and is almost impossible to see when one holds the book gingerly.

Despite these issues, the selection and variety of images is excellent and the contact sheets insightful. The concise and multilingual text would make it broadly appealing to a general library collection, and the incisive selection of artists and images would appeal to more focused art libraries. This book is a welcome addition to a growing area of photographic research.

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