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Owens: Documentary Photography, A Personal View / Publish Your Own Photo Book

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S.U.N.Y. at Purchase

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Publish Your Own Photo Book (A Guide to Self-Publishing). Published by Bill Owens, P. O. Box 687, Livermore, CA 94550, 1979. 140 pp. $8.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Ellan Young
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Bill Owens was in the enviable position of doing exactly what he wanted for one year—one day each week. This is the time he gave himself to work on the project which culminated in his book Suburbia. In Documentary Photography Owens uses his strategies in producing the work as a way of discussing the field.

For 11 years Owens was a general news photographer for a small-town paper in Livermore, California, a position he considers ideal. It enabled him to have the time and energy to create the books for which he is known. He appreciates the amount of control he had in his assignments, with much more freedom and variety than is ever possible on a large city newspaper—a good point in this reviewer’s experience, although the latter does have more glamour. The book begins with Owens’ describing his start on a college newspaper where his pictures of the student riots during the sixties earned him money as well as a valuable portfolio. Next comes some good advice for the aspiring photographer such as this example: “The only way to learn it is to do it. One needs to make all the photographic mistakes—in the streets, in the darkroom and in selling your photographs. The mistakes are a necessary part of learning to ‘do’ photography professionally.” Owens warns against attempting at the beginning of a career to make it as a free-lance photographer, especially outside New York City or Los Angeles. He feels that too often free-lancers drift toward commercial work for the money and never manage to develop a personal style. For those still intent on trying it there is helpful advice here on what types of publications to approach; portfolios; the importance of selling oneself; and the help available when one shares information with colleagues.

Book publishing is also covered. Owens tells exactly what he did to get his first book accepted. His study of suburban lifestyles began close to home with the area he knew best, and he persuaded the city council of Livermore to give him $500 for fifty photographs of historical importance. He worked hard for three weekends and gave the city archival prints for its library files.

To record his neighbors’ lives. He used his newspaper contacts to get subjects, and he even ran classified ads asking people to cooperate on the project. Straight Arrow Books agreed to publish Suburbia. Five hundred prints were edited to select the one hundred twenty-eight final images. Acknowledging that having a photo book published will never make one rich and famous, Owens rightly stresses the importance to a photographer of being published for the other rewards it brings, such as grants and teaching assignments. It took six more years of work as a small-town news photographer and the publication of two more books (Our Kind of People and Working) before he felt able to leave the paper and continue on a free-lance basis. Owens discloses the hard facts about the economics of photo book publishing. On the first printing, which takes a year or more to sell for most photographic books, the publisher makes less money than the author. Many of these books fail to earn back their production cost. At the end of this chapter Owens’ description of two rushed assignments he did for Newsweek in 1976 brings him back to his original thesis: shooting for a big commercial magazine is no fun. Doing one’s own book with time and only inward pressure is the most rewarding photojournalism.

It is well to study Owens’ ideas on grants since he has been quite successful with them. Still he emphasizes that they really only pay for film and supplies and that his projects are labors of love.

The excellent suggestions offered under the heading “General Rules” may seem obvious when one is reading them, but they are things which can easily be overlooked in the excitement of a shooting session. In the chapters on cameras and lighting Owens proclaims his love for the larger than 35mm format camera, and after such enthusiasm it is tempting to think of running out and buying one of the new 6 x 7 models. Like Bruce Davidson, Owens feels that carrying a heavy camera shows his subjects that he means business and distinguishes him from all the Nikon-toting amateurs. I disagree with him that the medium format is preferable for documentary work in general. For posed portraits in peoples’ homes and in studios, yes, but in the field and in the streets where one is on foot all day even two small 35mm bodies and a couple of lenses weigh heavily on the shoulder. Since 11 x 14 enlargements of good quality can be made from 35mm negatives, and since projectors are standardized to 35mm slides, why make life more difficult with a big camera? Owens acknowledges that a candid photograph usually gives more information and insight than a posed one. It would seem preferable to increase the possibilities of getting this type rather than to decrease them by using a large and noisy camera. For establishing one’s credentials and genuine interest with subjects, and for being admitted to occasions and locations where these desirable pictures are likely to be found, I recommend giving photographs to people whenever possible. From the way Bill Owens talks about his subjects I feel sure that he did this as well on all his projects.
The chapter on lighting is clear and to the point, with more good concrete advice. The book concludes with a list of stock agencies, examples of how to fill out a grant application, and recommendations on photography books and magazines. Altogether there is much valuable material in this book, and it is made more interesting by the feeling the reader gets of Owens' commitment to his work.

For the photographer struggling to make a living as a pro and interested in documentary work the message here is the importance of setting aside time to photograph what interests you most.

After being thoroughly inspired by Bill Owens' book on documentary photography a photographer could well decide that he has something to say and that it would be worth the effort to see it through to book form. Owens himself has done this, in Publish Your Own Photo Book (A Guide to Self-Publishing). This book, then, is recommended reading. More than anything else today, a book furthers a photographer's career, says the author, since the photojournalists of the picture magazines now have too much competition from television. He cites Les Krims as a person whose own special vision plus the will to publish his own books have made him a name in the photographic art world. Owens is bitter about what is considered "art," but sticks to his guns as one who would rather tell us something about the walls of peoples' homes than make pretty pictures to hang on those walls.

The book begins with book contracts with publishers—how they should differ when a photo book is involved (since they are written mainly for other types of works). For those who want to try the regular publishing route there are lists of photography book publishers, large trade publishers, and packagers as well as figures concerning production costs. Next is a list of step-by-step rules for publishing one's own book: lists of good printers, helpful ideas in the form of letters from other self-publishers describing their experiences, and suggestions as to how to go about getting publicity for your book. As a photographer the self-publisher is in a much better position than the regular commercial publisher to know the photographic marketplace and to find hundreds of newspapers and magazines to review the book.

Also included are an example of a press release, lists of magazines which review books (including foreign ones), and some of the better-known photo critics, and Sunday magazines of large metropolitan newspapers which might publish photo essays from the book. Another chapter covers various avenues of distribution including lists of mail order photo houses, book store chains, small book distributors, book clubs, and museum book stores. Then there are a few pages on book design, tax and legal problems, and terms used in publishing, along with a list of volunteer lawyers for the arts. The book ends with a blow-by-blow account of how this particular book was published.

Bill Owens does everything for the photographer but stake out an original idea for a new book.