Amidst and Beyond

by Alice Connew, Virginia Woods-Jack

Published on 10.03.2021



On the occasion of the publication of Dwelling in the Margins: Art Publishing in Aotearoa*, a book that offers an insight into alternative and independent publishing in Aotearoa New Zealand, HUM is pleased to publish this conversation between Berlin-based Alice Connew & Wellington-based Virginia Woods-Jack, featuring as a chapter in the new book. As photographers, Connew and Woods-Jack speak about their artistic and publishing practices, and about their work highlighting women in photography through collaborative projects and platforms that foster debate, visibility and community.*

Edited by Katie Kerr, Dwelling in the Margins *is released in February 2021 by GLORIA Books, an intercontinental publishing platform founded by Kerr and Connew, which produces art and photography books that experiment with the publishing process. You can find out more and order the book here.*

ALICE CONNEW I thought I'd start this conversation by recognising the similarities in our respective practices—we are both photographers, both women, and within that, we are both interested in publishing photobooks and in championing other female photographers and artists. For me, this work and advocacy is manifested in a small publishing output, GLORIA, which I run

with graphic designer Katie Kerr. GLORIA is an intercontinental platform (I am based in Berlin with an impending move to Bristol on the cards, Katie is in Tāmaki Makarau Auckland) that focuses on the publication of art and photography books, and puts us, as 'the artist', in complete control of the publishing process.

Your advocacy sits in a more digital space—you launched the Women in Photography New Zealand & Australia (WIP) platform on Instagram back in 2018, and have since featured a large number of photographers from all experience levels and backgrounds.

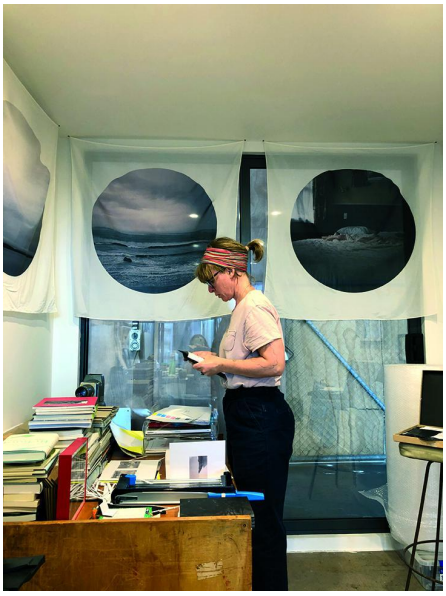
I am, of course, a big fan of the initiative and so I have many questions, but I suppose it's best to start at the beginning and ask what prompted you to launch the project and create a space that celebrated women's contributions to the photographic industry in Aotearoa and Australia.

VIRGINIA WOODS-JACK Thank you Alice, it's lovely to have this conversation with you, as a supporter and artist we have loved having on WIP.

As an artist (and as a human being), I've always believed in the importance of championing another's work, as each person's practice is a reflection of who they are and how they engage with the world. I am from the UK, and when I arrived here nearly seventeen years ago I wasn't sure whether there just weren't many artists around or whether there was a distinct lack of visibility for many practising artists in New Zealand. It was particularly noticeable back then when social media was an unknown entity.

As the years rolled on, I increasingly wanted to create an opportunity for visibility and relationship building through a community where photo-based artists, both emerging and established, could share their work alongside one another and—importantly—talk about their work with others. I was also really inspired by what I was seeing outside of the gallery scene, so I felt that having a centralised platform to be able to share that work and be a part of that wider conversation would be hugely beneficial. My hope was that others would feel the same. I decided to keep the focus on female-identifying and non-binary artists as I was intrigued to hear their voices, to find out what inspired them in

their work and how they overcame hurdles in their own practice, both creatively and personally. Unfortunately, the fact is that even though we make up the larger percentage of arts graduates, women are still underrepresented in the arts globally—and that is something I wanted to make a small contribution towards resolving.



Virginia Woods-Jack folding pages of a book dummy in her studio, Pōneke Wellington, 2019. Image courtesy Virginia Woods-Jack,



The unofficial GLORIA portrait. Alice Connew (L), Katie Kerr (R) and Katie's daughter Rita (centre), Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2020. Image courtesy GLORIA Books.

AC The underrepresentation of women in photography—and graphic design—is definitely a topic close to my heart. When Catherine Griffiths, my (step)mother, launched Designers Speak Up and we began working on the Directory of Women Designers, I could see the statistics around the gender imbalance in New Zealand's design industry paralleled in photography.[01] When 10×10 launched their book *How We See: Photobooks by Women* they noted that in the six major publications of 'books on books' just 10.5% of those showcased were photobooks by women.[02] It's clearly not just a problem within Aotearoa but I do feel that the wonderful thing is that because the industry is smaller there's a possibility of it being shaken up and sorted out quicker—I'm an optimist!

As a New Zealander living overseas and participating in book fairs and festivals in Europe, I've noticed differences in the assumptions and attitudes of attendees that Katie hasn't really experienced so often when doing the New Zealand circuit. I find that if I'm running a table on my own I'm often asked if I work *for* GLORIA or told it's sweet of me to 'volunteer my weekend'. When I say I am one of the founders people's eyebrows jolt up for a fraction of a second. If Tim Hook, my partner, is kindly volunteering *his* weekend to help me out, people gravitate to him with their questions about the books. These are such small, almost insignificant gestures, but when they stack up so frequently over the course of a two-day fair, it's hard to ignore the bigger meaning behind them.

When Katie and I launched GLORIA we lightly acknowledged the significance of being a publishing venture run by women but we hadn't put too much thought or focus on the fact. The more we shape GLORIA, the more important that point has become for both of us. From the start, we were in complete agreement that we wanted to work with and champion artists, photographers, designers and other publishers who subscribe to a supportive ethos. What I loved about participating in the WIP takeover is that you encourage conversation and extend the opportunity beyond a platform of portfolio presentation. You offer a moment to talk in-depth about the work and processes involved. It has become a beautiful digital archive.

VWJ I am glad you see WIP as a growing archive as I feel the same. The starting point for identifying what we wanted WIP to do and to be was the writing of the profile's bio on Instagram—150 characters to sum up something that was so deeply rooted. The limitation of the character count became a key tenet of WIP—it sparked a discussion (in this case with Caroline McQuarrie and Christine McFetridge) where we came up with a bio that I am really proud of:

A platform to highlight women and non-binary creators working in photo-based arts in NZ and AU. Engage. Connect. Collaborate. Debate. Promote.

The first sentence is the *who* and the last five words are the cornerstones of *what* we want to do.

I am a huge fan of artist talks as they offer us the opportunity to glean something of the creative process, and the research and passion that goes into making a body of work—the hurdles, the challenges and the solutions. Artist talks initiate discussion, which in turn encourages us to talk about the work with others, and so the cycle continues. The conversations that happen with the artists both before, during and after the takeover are where my passion lies, probably because I am a very curious person. I would, of course, love for more engagement from the audience and I sometimes wonder what stops people from diving in. But I am, like you, an optimist and I know that the audience enjoys the conversations I have, as the curator, with the artists.

I found it interesting hearing your comments on the assumptions of the attendees at overseas book fairs who see you in the role of supporter rather than founder. These assumptions say a lot about how men and women are viewed—that it is one role or the other, that we can't embody both. I like to think that we can. I am sure you handled yourself in such a way that it did not create a continuance of the awkwardness of the situation, but I wonder what would have happened had you enquired into why they made those assumptions? Is that something you considered or would consider in the future?

Ultimately we all should be recognised for the diverse range of roles we both do and can play. We should accept, and be accepting of, the fact that we all need to be both supporters and supported, regardless of gender. This is doubly so amongst women—yet sadly we can be each other's worst enemy. I think we have all experienced this, but I practise a radical hope in a future where we can all acknowledge the strength in collectivity, and where we incorporate more equality into our daily lives. None of us are in this alone.



Alice and Virginia's chapter in *Dwelling in the Margins: Art Publishing in Aotearoa*, published February 2021, by GLORIA Books. Image courtesy GLORIA Books.



Dwelling in the Margins: Art Publishing in Aotearoa, published February 2021, by GLORIA Books. Image courtesy GLORIA Books.



Internal pages of *Dwelling in the Margins: Art Publishing in Aotearoa*, published February 2021, by GLORIA Books. Image courtesy GLORIA Books.

AC You know, I've never pursued the spoken *why* when dealing with someone and their assumptions in that context before. However, I don't pander to any awkwardness that stems from the situation—it's theirs to navigate out of. I'm not hostile at all, but that beat of silence as they figure out their mistake-by-assumption is hopefully just uncomfortable enough for them not to make the same comment to the woman at the next table. It's also a pick-your-battles situation too; I don't always have the energy to engage and educate others on their own gender biases.

Engage. Connect. Collaborate. Debate. Promote. They are great calls to action for both digital and print realms. Self-publishing comes from a long history of resistance—a rebellious response to economic, social and political markets. I see it as an urge to make and do outside of the confines of profit. Producing a photobook, to quote Bruno Ceschel, author of *Self Publish, Be Happy*, is to do 'two unprofitable things: make art and publish'.[03] Simply by participating in this subversive culture, social interaction is stimulated: a space is provided, buoyed by a single publication, to engage, connect, collaborate, debate and promote, whether that's alone, in person or online.

Do you think there is crossover between print and digital publishing in this way? Especially when a battle against the algorithm exists as we strive for engagement and promotion.

VWJ I have been thinking about 'the beat of silence' during my pause in replying to you, whilst the world is being asked to stop for many beats—firstly due to Covid-19 and currently to

bear witness to the Black Lives Matter movement around the world. I've been thinking about how we who hold white privilege need to sit in our discomfort to be able to listen and learn, which has brought me back to the pillars of WIP: 'Engage. Connect. Collaborate. Debate. Promote.' These words, our intentions and goals, have taken on a new resonance on many occasions over the last few weeks, and they speak vividly to your notes on self-publishing as a form of resistance against economics and, even more so, marginalised voices. The words are a call to arms.

This is an exciting period of history to be living through—in all walks of life we are being asked to think about how we can amplify the voices of others. Publishing—whether it be print or digital—is so important right now, don't you think? I've heard of printing presses in London being donated to print protest flyers so that marginalised voices can be read in print as well as heard online. This is the power of digital and print coming together.

I recently read 'The Combahee River Collective Statement' by Zillah Eisenstein, which sets out the intentions and concerns of a group of Black feminists, first formed in 1974. This manifesto was originally printed, as this was the only form of publishing back then, yet the digitisation of this document now means I can read it in 2020, in Pōneke Wellington. We are a whole generation and continent apart, yet their thoughts are made visible through digital dissemination. I should add that anything that holds weight in my life and travels with me wherever I go, whether I've sought it out or been given it, is usually in the printed form—be that a book, the work of an artist or a love letter.

It feels like we are entering a new phase and the next steps need to be bold and inclusive. Are you excited about where self-publishing could sit within the changing social and cultural environment?



AC It certainly does feel like the world is entering a new phase and so many issues, which have been bubbling close to the surface, are now boiling over. At long last.

It's interesting you mention that print—be it sought out or given, as you say—is the medium that sticks with you. Through these past few weeks I've pulled back on my digital consumption and have withdrawn into printed matter to help me grapple with the state of the world. For me, switching off, signing out of and deleting apps felt so necessary in order to avoid algorithmic white centering. There was a cacophony of white voices that erupted declaring acknowledgment of privilege, which began to feel like an echo chamber, defeating the core request of listening and taking dedicated action. I felt I needed to head back to 'proper' research by not allowing a constant scroll of misinformation to dictate how I will actively participate in a meaningful way in this world shift.

In saying that, the absolute power of social media in not only raising awareness but dramatically pushing people to take stock of their views and choices has been incredible to witness. And the spilling out of online communities into real-world action is wonderful. I too saw online a press offering to print flyers and posters for protests free of charge, and it is those small moments where the coming together of the two worlds produces something

magnificent. It is in these moments that I feel particularly hopeful for the future of self-publishing. There's an emphasis on the importance and the value of the medium. Print will never die as long as protest—in whatever shape or form that may be—exists.

Footnotes

01. These statistics, along with information about Designers Speak Up and The Directory of Women Designers, can be found at designersspeakup.nz.

02. See Russet Lederman, Olga Yatskevich and Michael Lang, *How We See: Photobooks by Women* (10×10 Photobooks, 2018).

03. Bruno Ceschel, *Self Publish, Be Happy: A DIY Photobook Manual and Manifesto* (Aperture, 2015), 5.

Biographies



Alice Connew is a photographer with a focus on social, economic and political forces that construct and constrain facets of society. She produces work that is informed by intuitive links between daily life, news, history and culture. Through long-term projects, her images draw on these perceptive connections and by way of persistent research and thought, strong visual narratives are woven together. Alice's work is regularly shown through Europe and Oceania. Most recently her photobook *Still Looking Good* was a finalist in the 2019 Australia and New Zealand Photobook Awards and listed as the Best Antipodean Photobook 2019.

Alice is the co-founder of GLORIA Books, a publishing imprint focused on the publication of art and photography books. She studied at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in Otautahi, Aotearoa New Zealand and currently lives and works in Berlin, Germany.



Virginia Woods-Jack is a British-born photographic artist, advocate and curator currently living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her practice explores notions of connection to place, materiality and memory to consider relationships between the human and more-than-human worlds. By doing so, she aims to understand how memory informs the way people interact with the natural environment to highlight the importance of care in navigating the climate crisis. This being integral to the preservation of the planet.

Woods-Jack is the founder and curator of Women in Photography NZ & AU. She has exhibited widely, both locally and internationally, and her work is held in private collections in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, The United States, Europe and the United Kingdom. Her photographs have appeared in Harper's Magazine, The Guardian, The Observer and Time Magazine, among others, and she was a finalist in the 2010 New Zealand Contemporary Art Award. Her photobook *None of this was done with us in mind* will be published by Bad News Books in 2021.

She studied photography at the University of Creative Arts, England (1995-1998) and holds a Masters of Fine Art with distinction from CoCA at Massey University (2009).

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