

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Frank. *Household Inventory Record*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2013.

By Professor John Maturri
Queen College, City University of New York

With the emergence of online distribution of photography, traditional modes of presentation, particularly the photographic book, may seem to have become outmoded. With a virtually infinite stream of images constantly available, shouldn't the physical presentation of images in a printed format be obsolete? And yet photographic books continue to proliferate and to provide an alternate mode of perceiving the images that cannot easily, or at all, be reproduced online or in any form of digital presentation.

Robert Frank has long played a critical role in photography and his 1958 photographic book *The Americans* is a recognized classic that had a dramatic, perhaps revolutionary, impact on the form. An extended series of images of a series of road trips taken through the United States, the book was initially controversial because of its depiction of a vernacular American that had rarely been photographed in the stark, unromanticized style that Frank adopted. The photographs were raw, informal, and implicitly the rejected traditional standards of craft that were deemed appropriate for art photography. The book was strongly criticized as both anti-American and photographically inept, but it played a critical role in ushering the modern era of photography and the modern photographic book.

After publishing *The Americans*, Frank

shifted his energies to making a long series of experimental films. The still photographs that he took tended to be more personal, often dealing with such emotionally difficult matters as the deaths of his daughter and son. Pushing informality to the point that they seem to be just snapshots, these pictures at times included collage elements and often incorporated handwritten text that was written directly across the negative prior to printing. The recent book, *Household Inventory Record*, continues this later mode of Frank's work.

Frank is now 89 years of age and the title of the book suggests that he is using the book to take inventory of his life and the places in which he has lived that life. At about 29 cm by 14 cm with a black imitation leather cover and the title printed in gold lettering, the book takes the form of a sort of plain blank book, typically sold in stationary stores in the era prior to digital record keeping, designed to systematically catalog accumulated possessions. The mundane character of the book is, however, belied by the richly printed and strongly grained red endpapers that are placed at its front and the back, placing its depictions of everyday life into an elegant, almost liturgical frame.

The unconventional elongated format for the book allows - forces - Frank to place the photographs in a similarly unconven-

tional manner. The first photographs of the book are placed along the top of the each side of the facing pages, leaving the bottom two-thirds of the pages blank. These pictures consist of rather fuzzy images, in one case seemingly damaged, of someone holding up to the camera a long striped paper or fabric with the inscription “is the war over The war is over” written on top of it on the negative. The left hand picture is dated August 22, 1998 with a location being dually identified as Nova Scotia and New York, the sites of Frank’s two households. Several pages of three snapshot-like photographs going down each page, followed by the first color photograph of cliffs curving around an ocean bay, presumably taken near Frank’s Nova Scotia home. Beneath that picture is, aside from occasional captions, the only extended printed text, a brief meditation on the seasons in a place that “I have seen and never got tired of”.

This, then is primarily a partial inventory of Frank’s house in Mabou, Nova Scotia, although there is at least one 1969 photograph of his apartment in New York and a number of photographs of friends and family and places Frank has visited. Although there are a number of photographs of the house and its furnishings, the effect is less of a systematic inventory than of a scrapbook of somewhat random-seeming photographs and postcards running partially or wholly down the unorthodoxly formatted page. If *The Americans* was the record of a kind of travel diary of a Swiss expatriate moving through the geographical and social world of Frank’s adopted country, this book seems to consist of scattered fragments of Frank’s personal journey through life.

Upon looking carefully, however, the pictures and their relationships are less random than it initially might seem. Towards the end of the book, we are presented with a photograph, taken from an automobile, of an ocean bay quite similar to the early one that introduced the book, with the caption “LEAVING, APRIL 3, 2010”, the parallel hinting at an underlying, though perhaps undeveloped, narrative structure to the book. Images on facing pages, and down the same page, often echo each other in form and content. The two narrow side-by-side images on the very final right-hand page, facing a blank page on the left, portray a country scene and a city street, presumably echoing the dual households of Nova Scotia and New York that were mentioned in the scrawled text on the opening pages discussed above. Even Frank’s country of origin finds its place in the book towards its middle, not through a photograph taken by the photographer but with a reproduction, a drawn color postcard of the Swiss Alps placed below two winter scenes of Nova Scotia.

What is especially striking is the prevalence of included pictures that include photographs, photographers, and other images as part of their content. Towards the front of the book is a photograph of a woman, presumably Frank’s wife June Leaf, holding a postcards of ocean liners in each hand, with two images of presumably the same woman placed below, the bottom one picturing her as a much older and white haired woman, glancing in the direction of a framed travel postcard placed on the wall behind her. On the next page, Frank is seen photographing himself in a mirror in New York followed by a page of three photo-

graphs of Frank's Mabou studio, each centered on a small photograph of a man and a woman standing next to each other. Such double portraits are found at a number of places in the book, including one of Frank and his wife standing side by side with a picture of a domestic interior, which also appears proximately in a number of other included photographs, between them; above this on a page is a reproduction of a postcard of a line of women in the surf of a New York beach. Also included are a number of portraits of other photographers, at times standing next to their cameras. The central themes of home and travel here are inextricably linked in this inventory of a life marked by both.

The informal images included in *Household Inventory Record* look like the profusion of quickly glanced at digital snapshots that are found on the internet. Most characteristic of Frank's photo book, on the other hand, is that both the casual but rigorous complexity of its oddly shaped facing pages and perhaps and the simple physical act of turning the page, help engender a mode of attention and concentration that is rarely found in digital presentations. Placed and sequenced carefully in the book, the images, however casual seeming, take on a status equivalent to the permanent records that books of this title and format were designed to contain.