

**COME TOGETHER:  
photodebut AND THE COLLABORATION REVOLUTION**

**Essay by Aaron Schuman**

In early autumn of 2003, the photographer, Jan von Holleben, was presented with an extraordinary opportunity. A friend mentioned that a gallery, in the heart of Shoreditch, was in desperate need of an exhibition for London's PhotoMonth—the only challenge being that it would have to open within fifteen days. Immediately, von Holleben set to work in his characteristically gung-ho fashion. Firstly, he secured the space. Then, using an informal network that he had already established through friends from university and his involvement with the foundation, Young Photographers United (YPU), he started to contact every UK-based photographer he knew. Two weeks later, the gallery's walls were covered with images, and a boisterous crowd—nearly five-hundred strong—gathered to examine the work of forty promising photographers. 'On that night,' von Holleben muses, "photodebut was born.'

'It's funny how often I'm asked to justify why photographers should collaborate with one other,'" he continues, "Because to me, it seems like common sense. But when I began to work professionally, I discovered that the photographic industry could at times be an extremely aggressive and unfriendly environment. Like many photographers who are just starting out, I became increasingly frustrated by this overriding sense of hostility. Finally, I just came to the conclusion that, really, such a negative attitude was entirely unnecessary.'

A few days after the launch of the Shoreditch show, von Holleben met up with two of the participating photographers, Esther Teichmann and Andy Porter. At the opening, they had all simultaneously recognized the powerful potential that such a united front possessed, and decided to formalize the arrangement by officially forming their own photographers' collective. Firstly, they decided to call themselves **photodebut**, assuming the same name as the exhibition in order to begin building their public profile straight away. They then set about defining the fundamental mission of their organization: 'To promote, support, and connect emerging photographers.' Finally, the search for new members was on.

As von Holleben acknowledges, the startling contrast between a supportive academic community and the cut-throat professional arena comes as a great shock to thousands of fresh-faced photography graduates every year. But surprisingly, few think to band together in an organized manner upon entering such new and hostile territory, and it was this response that transformed von Holleben—along with Teichmann, Porter, and subsequently, **photodebut** itself—into the foremost ambassador for emerging photographers in the UK. 'In such a highly competitive atmosphere you

need colleagues, contacts, connections, equipment, criticism, advice, and so on,' he explains, 'and you can easily gain all of these things by simply aligning yourself with other practitioners, rather than perpetuating a sense of rivalry. Call me naïve or idealistic, but I've always wondered why it shouldn't be possible to join forces, like in so many other professions. We created **photodebut** simply to bring photographers together—or, as one of our other members has described it, we decided to “befriend the enemy”.'

**photodebut** has matured at a extremely impressive rate in its short lifetime, thanks entirely to the overwhelming ambition and dedication of all of its members. Since that crucial evening in 2003, it has continued to regularly stage acclaimed group exhibitions, each of which revolves around a general theme that accommodates the work of every member. Furthermore, they have teamed up with various art publications—such as *DayFour*, *Next Level*, and *Creative Review*—producing collective photo-essays and artist-led projects, including a body of work that is currently in progress, directed by Mike Figgis for *Frieze*. At the same time, various members have focused their attention on **photodebut**'s educational agenda, hosting portfolio reviews, contributing to photo-related conferences, guest-lecturing at universities and colleges, and delivering photographic workshops in underprivileged communities, including one recently held at Holloway prison. “Some people are interested in turning **photodebut** into an agency,” von Holleben says, “Others want to make it an educational body, and others simply want to organise group projects and make group exhibitions. I believe that all of these things are possible. **photodebut** is very organic, and its shape is entirely dependant on who is participating in it. Therefore, anything is possible, as long as just a few of us believe in it.”

Most importantly though, at least in the eyes of von Holleben, is the fact that the collective continues to formally meet on a monthly basis—for internal critiques, discussions on current practice, and proposals for potential future projects—providing a supportive, well-connected, and sophisticated community for all those involved. “I think that **photodebut** gives each of its members a certain sense of security and confidence. As a freelance photographer, out there on your own, there is always something that you don't know, but should know. Twenty people have twenty-times more experience, so inevitably someone in the organization can help to lead you in the right direction. Also,' he adds, 'we've discovered that we actually like each other quite a bit, so we've all gained twenty new friends as well. “

As von Holleben indicates, **photodebut**'s current membership figures stand at twenty, with only two new 'photodebutantes' having been admitted in 2005. This may come as a surprise, as one assumes that the organization would appeal to anyone and everyone. Von Holleben does receive at least ten enquiring emails a week, but **photodebut** requires all interested parties to complete an extensive five-page application form, and if shortlisted, to attend a rigorous interview and portfolio review. 'A common misconception is that we are some sort of Royal Photographic Society for

students—that you simply pay a membership fee and you’re in,” explains von Holleben. ‘But for structural, financial and ultimately practical reasons, we have come to realize that we must limit our numbers, at least for the time being. Also, I want to stress that we aim to be a vivid and prolific network, and we need each member to be both willing and able to proactively contribute to the overall dynamic of the group, presenting opportunities that benefit and inspire others, as well as taking advantage of all that our existing network already has to offer.’

For some, this may appear to be rather hypocritical stance for an organization that was founded on the premise that it would be an antidote to the industry’s inherent elitism. But von Holleben counters this with a convincing line of reasoning. “In order for us to remain truly effective, we have to remain a realistic size. As a small group, we have managed to secure exhibitions, commissions, collaborations, guest-lecturing positions, and even reductions from various suppliers within the industry. It would be much more difficult for us to accomplish these things as a group—and to remain creative and productive as photographers ourselves—if we were a huge, faceless organization, in which the individual strengths of our members were overshadowed by the sheer scale of our operation. So we now strive to function as an example to others; our intention is to inspire photographers to come together, to seriously invest in collective endeavors, and to take our ideas further. Also, we do keep in contact with everyone who approaches us, we invite them to all of our events, and we wholeheartedly encourage and support them in creating their own small communities.” A wry smile crosses von Holleben’s face. “Of course, if they start to grow bigger and better than us, we will *crush* them!”, and in an instant, one can sense just how proud von Holleben is of all that *photodebut* has accomplished so far, and how readily he anticipates others rising to the challenge.