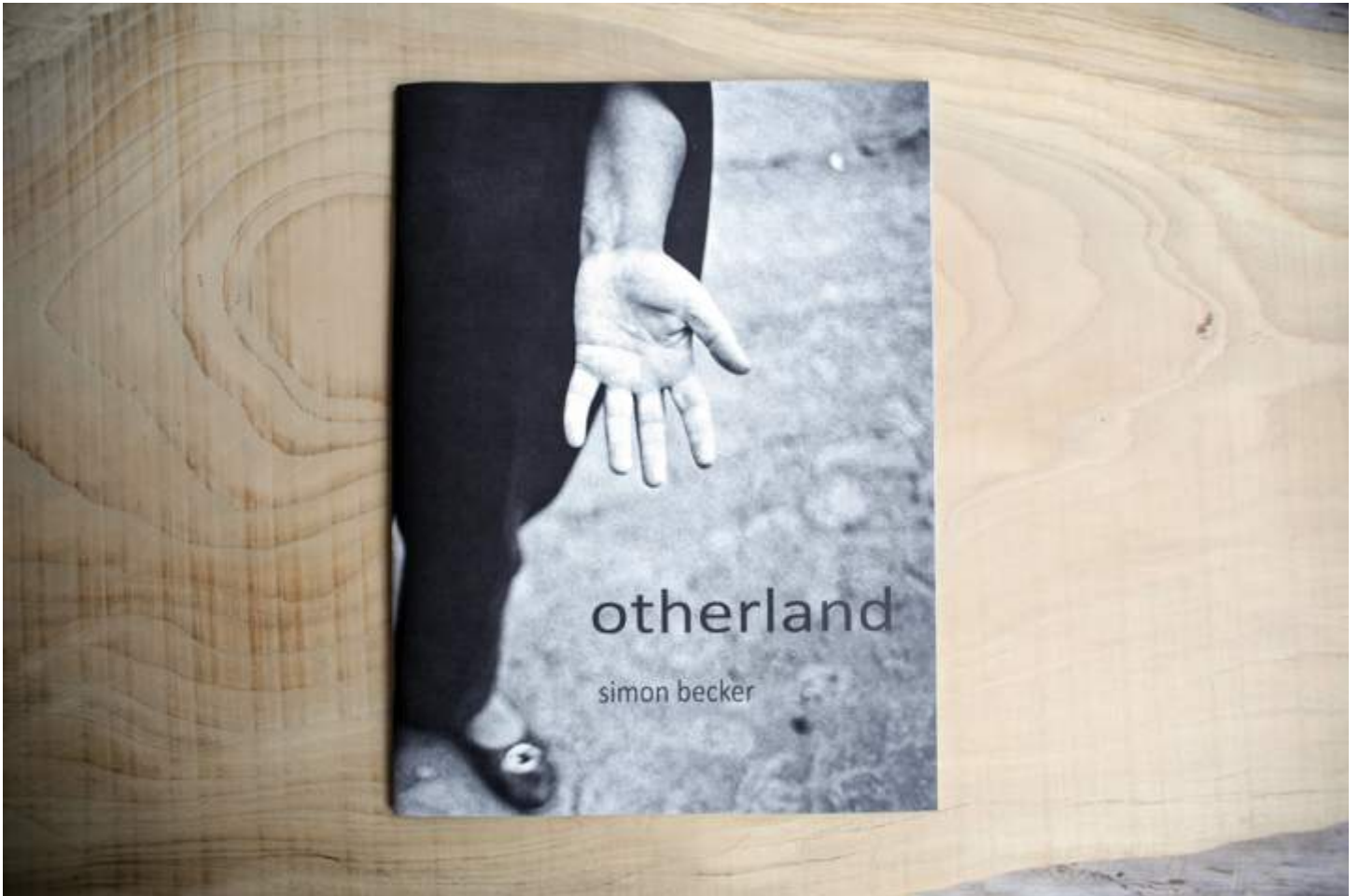


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Jesse's Book Review – Otherland by Simon Becker



It is always nice to see your friends putting out great work, so when my friends Simon Becker sent me a copy of his book I knew I had to get Jesse to review it. Check it out.

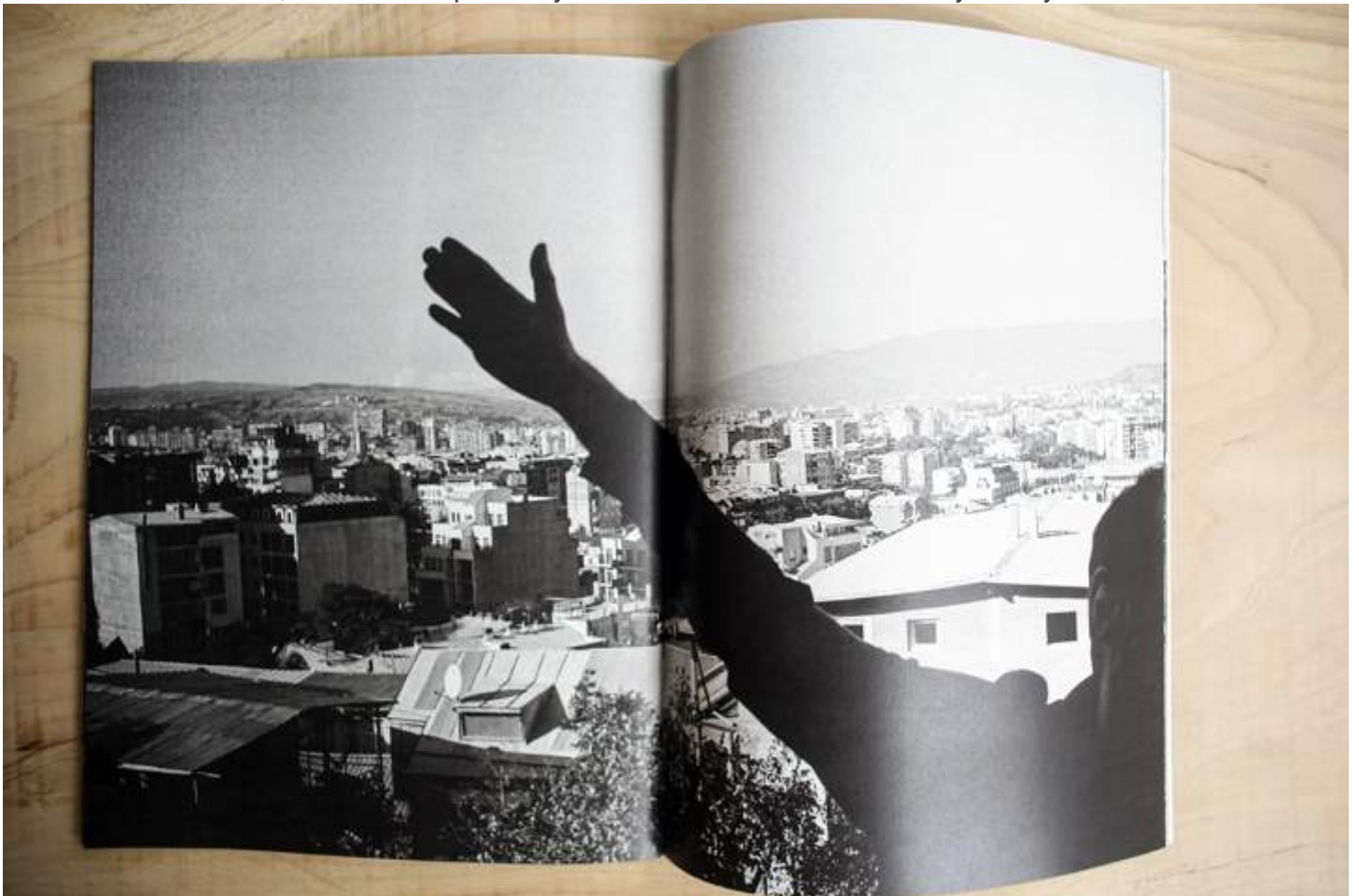
Was at the Japan Camera Hunter office the other day and amongst the array of just cool stuff he usually has there, this rather unassuming cover caught my eye. Bellamy gave me some background on the photographer as I was flipping through it and decided to write about it. With the Tokyo Photography museum back open, I had just been browsing their library for these reviews so felt it would be nice to highlight something a little more low key.



otherland is a photo book by photographer Simon Becker. It is hand numbered and limited to 100 copies published two years ago and contains about 60 photos all shot in black and white. I can't really tell where this other land actually is...which is going to become the first point of this review.

For travel photography you can usually figure within the first pages where the locale is (if the title didn't blatantly do it), because that is what tourists do. They shoot things a tourist is supposed to shoot, in the process identifying the difference from where they are from to where they are traveling at. At this level of photography that is usually the paradox of these type of books.

Simon avoids this trapping because he it isn't the photographer experiencing something different and subconsciously highlighting this point, but a photographer who is simply immersed. So we aren't getting country identifying details because it is no longer about that surface but about the people themselves. And you can see this, in the lack of any distance between him and his subjects. Think Bellamy actually said it best when he made a comparison to Josef Koudelka. The locales and situations feel similar, but more importantly it is the sorta bohemian lifestyle they share in common.



Like all good photo books there is a visual grammar here at work. From the front cover on, there is a subtle emphasis of hands. The outstretched hands on the cover welcome us into *otherland* that from the third page on becomes a motif.

A hand on a steering wheel leading our eye to a play on lines with dilapidated telephone poles through the window juxtaposed to a man pointing to his reflection now outside of the vehicle looking back in. There is a beautiful two photo sequence of a man who appears to be free basing (I know beautiful is not something typically associated with free basing, but if you see the photos) with his face completely obscured both by his hands.

Very next page there is a kid in the foreground with a knife confronting the camera although with an averted gaze while everyone in the background has their hands in the air facing what could be a political event. This would then indicate the country and most photographers would shoot that and include it here but because the Simon's concern is beyond that, we just see the people and not the event. Forgot which photographer said it but it was something like, "often the people at the event are more interesting than the event itself" and this is precisely what he does...even while using the motif with hands.



The last photo (my favorite) just features three sets of hands of a man and woman. The first set at the lower third features the woman's hand aggressively pointing while the man's hand is passive, the second set the woman's hand is open and the man is making a number 2 sign, and in the third set the woman's hand is open towards the man and the man is clutching chair in front of him. It works because of its ambiguity. The framing emphasizes this and the visual fun is to speculate on the conversation of the people. All of which probably takes place in the viewer's head within the first 5 seconds of viewing it.

It closes the book with a suggestion of universal language examining the similarities of the cultures instead of the differences...or even more grotesque the exotic.



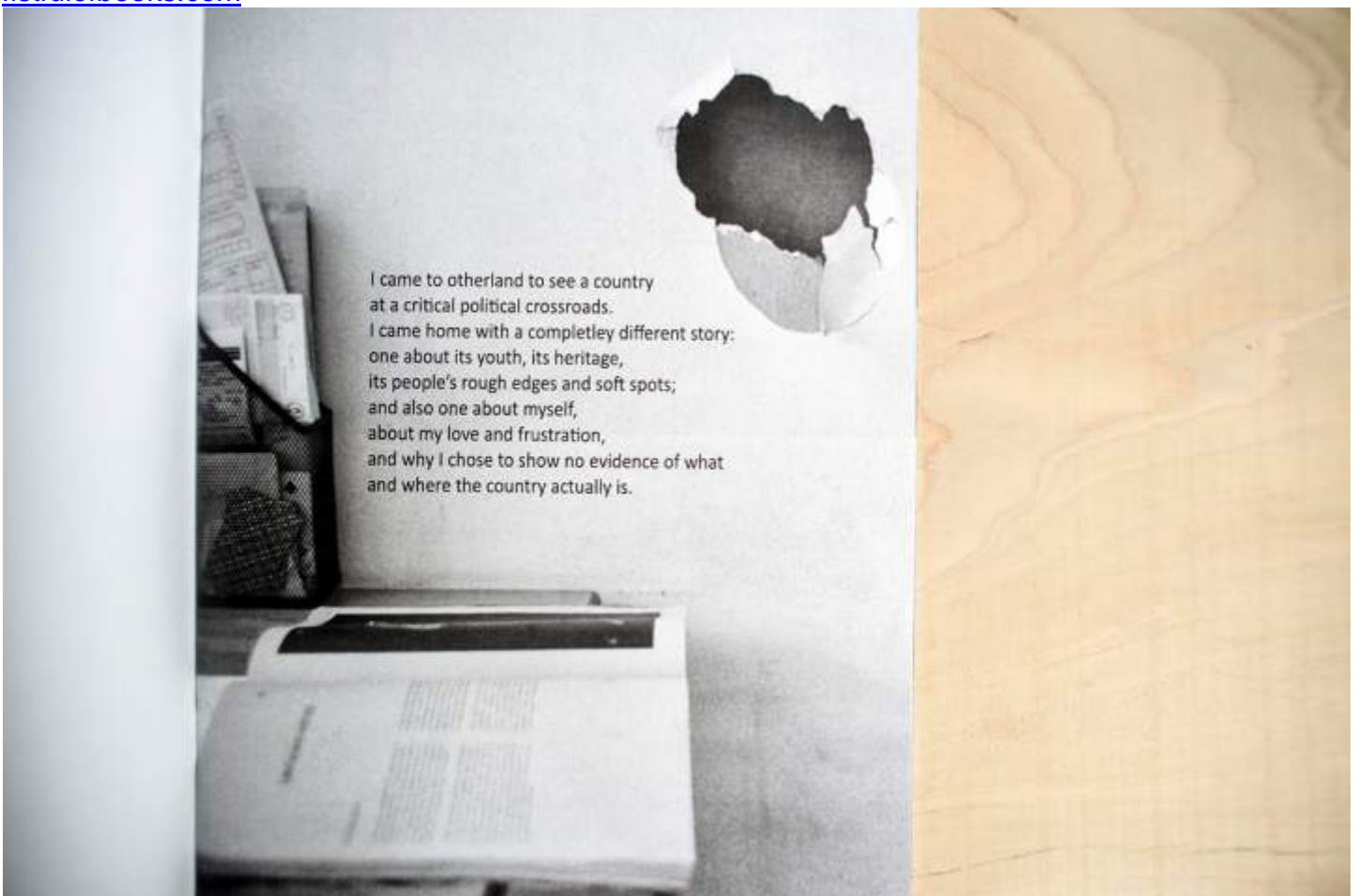
There as well are shots without people. They are witty plays on signage, textures, and shadow that serve to build the atmosphere...the feel of the country without just blatantly telling us.

For me living in Shibuya, I find it so easy to simply shoot the sights of Shibuya but how many actually capture the true atmosphere of it or the textures of the city. This can't be achieved by shooting the main spots that people who haven't been there would recognize. The photo itself would say, "yes we all know this spot, but with this photo I am showing you I existed there." There is of course nothing wrong with that unless you are selling a photo book in which it does nothing for anyone looking through it wanting to understand anything beyond the top layer. I don't know what country he took these photos...but I *know* the country where he took these photos...is the point I am driving too.



Unlike my recent reviews this book can be obtained for a mere 7 GBP from the publisher [Fistful of Books](#). I haven't heard of them but looking at their site they have quite a few interesting photo books. Check it out~

fistfulofbooks.com



Jesse Freeman is a friend, photographer and movie buff. He has a great knowledge of photography books and classic cinema. He can also be relied upon for decent music recommendations.

You can more of his work and passions at the following places:

<https://www.instagram.com/nothinginparticular/>

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