

Anne Morgenstern, Macht Liebe

By [Loring Knoblach](https://staging-collectordaily-staging.kinsta.cloud/author/loring-knoblach/) / In [Photobooks](https://staging-collectordaily-staging.kinsta.cloud/category/photobooks/) / December 1, 2022

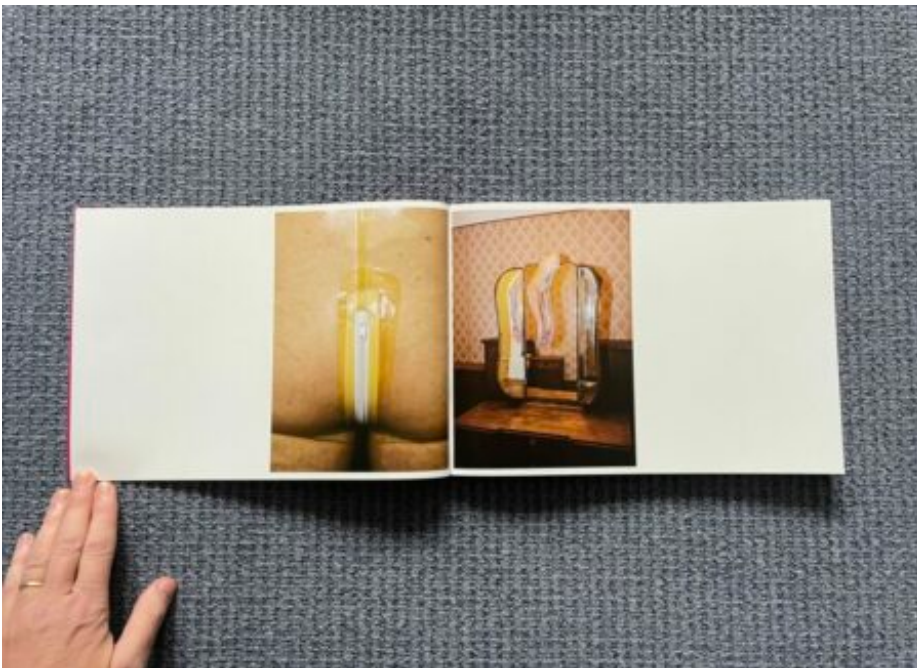
JTF (just the facts): Published in 2022 by Hartmann Books ([here](https://hartmann-books.com/en/produkt/anne-morgenstern-macht-liebe-en/)). Embossed softcover with Japanese binding, 30.5 x 21.5 cm, 192 pages, with 134 color reproductions. Includes an essay by Danaé Panchaud in German/English/French. Design by Claudio Barandun. (Cover and spread shots below.)



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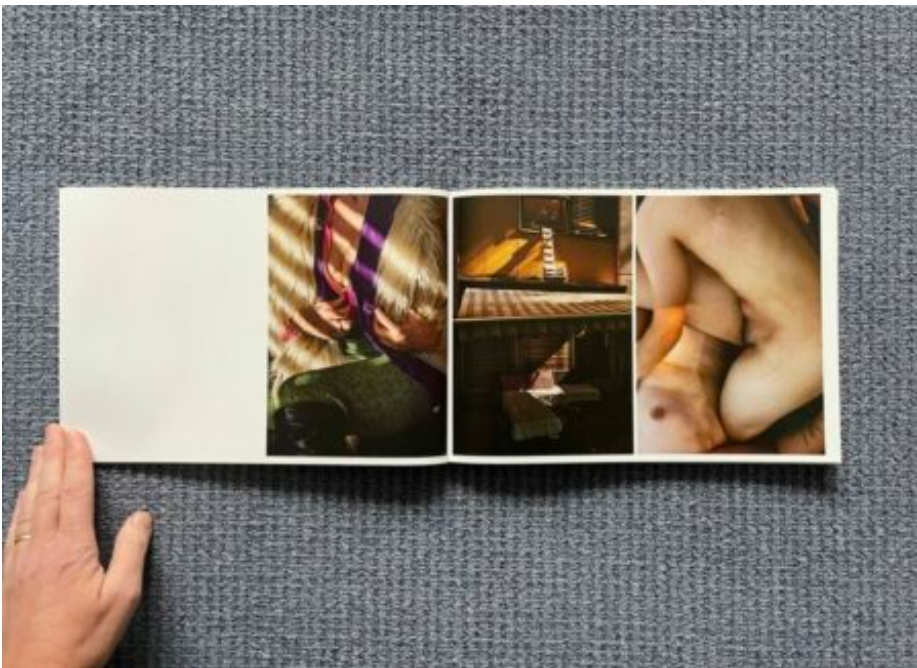
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Comments/Context: Perhaps it is some kind of universal human preference for ordering that leads us to classify and categorize almost everything around us. We gather and divide things into groups, mark commonalities and differences, and create indexes and charts that systematize our observations. And while this drive toward structure has many benefits, one of its drawbacks is

that the inherent tendency to separate this from that, in from out, and like from unlike (however we might define these various terms) similarly amplifies frictions that keep things apart rather than noting the affinities that bring them together.

Across the history of the medium, the making of photographs of the human body has been tacitly controlled by a range of factors and influences: what bodies and body parts have been seen as acceptable or beautiful, who could be a subject, who could make the images, and what motives and desires could be captured, just to name a few. Embedded in this structuring was (and in many ways still is) a set of societal norms and cultural expectations, thereby creating a dividing line between those photographs (and subjects) that fell inside those lines and those that didn't. And while this dissonance of separating binaries has existed since the very invention of the medium, in recent years, the questioning and renegotiating of these long standing "rules" has become much more active. We're now asking ourselves harder questions about who is included and left out, who is standing behind the camera and what implicit attitudes and biases they bring to the making of images, and how we can better represent bodies and desires that don't conform to a (very) narrow range of norms and restrictions.

In this context, Anne Morgenstern's recent photobook *Macht Liebe* does something altogether remarkable. The most obvious thing to do in this situation is to shine a spotlight on the so-called norm being applied (perhaps best summarized as the male gaze, i.e. a straight white cisgender male photographer making images of a straight white, young, healthy cisgender female subject) by making pictures that actively fall outside that structure. And in the past decade in particular, we have seen all kinds of sensitively made examples of just this idea, with those who have been outside the norm in one way or another now inclusively brought inside a much larger tent. But what's intriguing is that this approach doesn't actually break down the isolating force of the underlying in/out binary; it simply states that there are alternate perspectives, lives, and vantage points we should be paying attention to and valuing. What Morgenstern does with her pictures is subtly different; she doesn't acknowledge either the norm or the counter forces, but instead steps forward into a world where bodies and desires come in all shapes and sizes, and each is observed, represented, and validated with the same sense of attentiveness. There is no greater than or less than equation to balance out, no injustice or omission to correct, but simply a way of seeing that recognizes and affirms human bodies and desires in variant forms without fuss or argument. That her egalitarian approach feels so fresh and radical says something about both where we've been and how far we still need to travel.

By giving her photobook the title *Macht Liebe* (either “make love” or “the power of love” when translated into English), Morgenstern might be signaling that, to trot out an old cliché, she’s a lover not a fighter. And her pictures are consistently filled with an empowering dose of affection, admiration, recognition, and affirmation for her subjects, almost especially when their identities or personas knowingly run across traditional boundaries of one kind or another. Even-handed warmth and sensitivity is applied to the bodies in every single image here, without any trace of judgement or critique, and part of the reason I think Morgenstern is so successful at this is that she is essentially a formalist at heart – she’s in love with these disparate bodies for their unique formal qualities and possibilities, and that interest makes it much easier for her to stand outside any one framework of allowed/not allowed, beautiful/not beautiful categorization that a viewer might decide to apply.

Macht Liebe has an elegantly simple design that is well matched to the way Morgenstern wants to communicate with us. Each two page spread has four available spots for imagery, two on each side of the gutter if the images are vertically oriented; a horizontal image (and there are only a few in the photobook) takes up two slots, but never across the gutter. Each spread is therefore an arrangement of between one and four images, or white spaces when no image is included. The page turns in *Macht Liebe* don’t matter much; it is the gathering of images into carefully arranged and sequenced spreads that forms the basis of the book, and it is in these spreads that Morgenstern gets playful with her formal connections and echoes.

While pictures of bodies make up more than half the images in this photobook, very few might be called traditional portraits where a person, clothed or otherwise, looks into the camera and engages us with directness. Many more of the photographs are either indirect, skewed, turned, cropped, or reoriented, offering us isolated body parts, close ups, fragmented embraces, and other momentary intimacies. Morgenstern then pairs these images with similarly tightly framed shots of interiors, still lifes, animals, and even less identifiable objects and natural elements. Each short sequence connects the images into visual harmonies and repetitions, juxtaposing bodies, colors, and textures into an intricate and often sensually vibrant choreography of form.

In one early spread, a disembodied “hands-up” gesture above some tubular vents is matched with a dense thicket of branches; nearby, the bare bottom of a body folded on a chair is echoed by the bulbous glow of green light on a metal door. These unlikely pairings are then followed by a nude body zipped into a clear plastic casing and a dangling arm seen multiplied in a three-piece mirror, the vertical forms and fingers/zipper teeth creating a vague call and response. A few spreads

later, three images line up into a clever flow – a nude body holding up a dog creating echoes of nipples and vertical cuts, followed by a 90 degree turn of those lines as seen in two pieces of yellowed paper loosely taped together, followed by a close up of teeth that recalls the nearby pieces of tape.

These kinds of formal connections abound in *Macht Liebe*. An upside down stretching cat leads to the folds of a pink shower curtain which leads to a nude man on a couch with his balls tucked between his legs, the visual connections all somehow making sense. On the next spread, color echoes in yellow and orange give way to jiggly formal repetitions between what looks like sweaty clothing and a stairway attached to a craggy rock formation. Next comes interlocked images of shiny black vinyl, tree branches, and fleshy bodies, followed by more color stories, one in light pink (between a pair of rolled up pants, an aging body, and some chair cushions) and another in red (between lipstick and a red necktie, some folds of red drapery, and a shadowy interior of red stripes). Heads and bodies turn and entangle, fuzzy textures of braided horse hair and white earmuffs link to each other, and the long black eyelashes worn by a nude man find affinities with a feathery fish fin and two yellow chicken feet. Again and again, Morgenstern centers formal studies of bodies in resonant surroundings, making even the most unlikely objects (a mechanical bone joint, a black workout machine, an eye behind gold glasses, a piece of white coral) into elegant dance partners.


Seen as an integrated flow, this is a photobook that is more than the sum of its parts – smart combinations of imagery expand the possibilities of these many bodies. Morgenstern sees each individual with empowering agency, not isolating the body as a specimen or curiosity, but deconstructing its associations and celebrating its uniqueness. This approach leads to a book filled with linked sensations and quirky multiplicities, where flesh and desire take many forms and live in many contexts. Its vibrant open-endedness is refreshing, offering us a promising path forward to a more accepting brand of contemporary photography.

Collector's POV: Anne Morgenstern does not appear to have consistent gallery representation at this time. As a result, interested collectors should likely connect directly with the artist via her website (linked in the sidebar).

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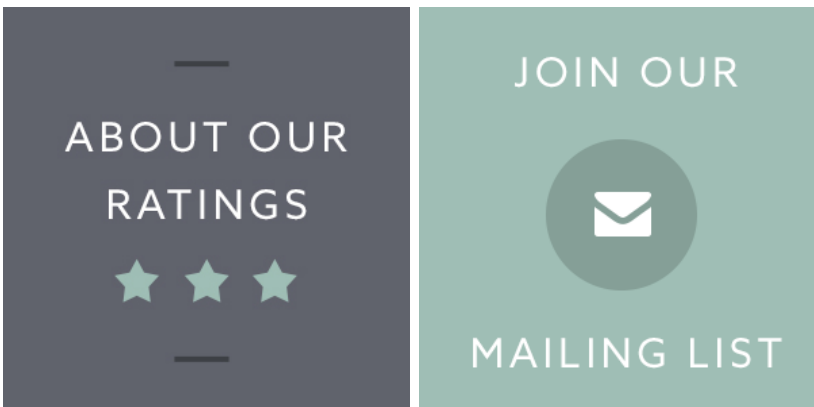
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