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# The polaroid image as photo-object

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## TITLE

‘The Polaroid image as photo-object’

## ABSTRACT

This article is part of a larger project on the cultural history of Polaroid photography and draws on research done at the Polaroid Corporate archive at Harvard and at the Polaroid company itself. It identifies two cultural practices engendered by Polaroid photography, which, at the point of its extinction, has briefly flared into visibility again. It argues that these practices are mistaken as novel but are in fact rediscoveries of practices that stretch back as many as five decades. The first section identifies Polaroid image-making as a photographic equivalent of what Tom Gunning calls the ‘cinema of attractions’. That is, the emphasis in its use is on the display of photographic technologies rather than the resultant image. Equally, the common practice, in both fine art and vernacular circles, of making composite pictures with Polaroid prints, draws attention from image content and redirects it to the photo as object.

## Keywords

Polaroid

Photo-objects

Cinema of attractions

Technological unconscious

Photo-collage

## **Introduction: photograph > image**

A photograph is not exhausted by its image-content, but is also something akin to a body. This is the case that is being made in a growing branch of photography studies that takes as its subject what it calls 'photo-objects'. For instance, near the end of his extensive survey of photographic memorial objects, Geoffrey Batchen writes of the 'need to develop a way of talking about the photograph that can attend to its various physical attributes, to its materiality as a medium of representation' (Batchen, 2004: 94). By this he means taking into account the way a photograph has been worked upon, with paint or writing; the modes of organisation it undergoes alongside other photographs, in albums or collages; its juxtaposition with other materials, such as human hair; and the heterogeneous forms of framing it submits to. A photograph is an image, so goes this school of thought, but it is also an object, it has a physical being in space and time. As Elizabeth Edwards puts it, 'the photograph has always existed, not merely as an image but in relation to the human body, tactile in experienced time, [an] object functioning within everyday practice' (Edwards, 1999: 228). 'Not merely... an image', Edwards writes, and it is a phrase that appears again in her introduction, with Janice Hart, to *Photographs Objects Histories*: 'it is not merely the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning, but that its material and presentational forms and the uses to which they are put are central to the function of a photograph as a socially salient object' (Edwards and Hart, 2004: 2). They might have written more neutrally that a photograph is 'more than an image', but that 'not merely' signals a polemical intent: a call to arms to take note of that which in the photograph exceeds the photographic image. They call this the 'materiality' of the

photograph and they identify three key forms that it takes: ‘the plasticity of the image itself, its chemistry, the paper it is printed on’; its ‘presentational forms’ (such as albums, mounts, and frames); and ‘the physical traces of usage and time’ (3).

These new photo-materialists prefer to examine photos that have been worked upon in one way or other *after* they have been made, but there is also a type of photograph which is *already* at the point of taking a photo-object of the sort that interests them – the Polaroid or ‘instant’ print. In Polaroid photography there is no gap between the exposure to light that produces an image and the process of making that results in the photographic object. What is more, the photographic image inside the Polaroid print’s familiar white frame is surely no longer a Polaroid if separated from that frame, which itself is supplementary to the image. And if it is scanned to reduce its three-dimensionality to electronic code, invariably the frame is scanned as well, in a tacit acknowledgment that the instant photo is irreducible to its image alone (see Figure 1). For these reasons, Nat Trotman can make a strong claim for the unique materiality of the Polaroid image:

The images contain a density unlike any other snapshot medium. They have...truly a physical depth and presence....The pictures have interiors, viscous insides of caustic gels that make up the image itself. Users are warned not to cut into the objects without protective gloves – these photographs can be wounded, violated. Their frame protects and preserves them like clothing around a vulnerable body (Trotman, 2002: 10).

It is not by chance that the Polaroid print captures critical attention at the very point of its imminent obsolescence, nor that Trotman finds in it the sort of substantiality lacking in the digital photography that is displacing it. Indeed, his anthropomorphizing of the photo-object is quite typical of this general movement in photography studies, which seeks to render corporeal and singular the photographic in an epoch when its material supports are increasingly screens rather than photographic paper and its singularity doubtful when it can be transmitted as code to any computer or network..

This anthropomorphism is most evident when Edwards and Hart call for an ‘ongoing investigation into the lives that photographs lead after their initial point of inception’, dubbing this activity a ‘social biography’ of objects (Edwards and Hart, 2004: 9-10). They are adapting here a phrase of Igor Kopytoff’s, who, in ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’, demonstrated the tension existing between commoditization and singularization (or sacralization) in all systems of exchange. While they adopt the phrase, Edwards and Hart do not take on Kopytoff’s analytic vocabulary. Indeed, it could be argued that the ‘photo-materialist’ project leans heavily towards ‘singularization’ in its efforts to rescue photographs from their commoditization as images, and is therefore part of what Kopytoff calls the ‘yearning for singularization in complex societies’ (Kopytoff, 1986: 80). The photo-materialists’ preference for older, usually 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs is a typical strategy of singularization, which is often achieved ‘by reference to the passage of time’ (Kopytoff, 1986: 80). Edwards and Hart admit as much when they state that ‘the premise of [their] volume precisely reinvests photographs of all

sorts with their own “aura” of thingness’ (Edwards and Hart, 2004: 9). Their project crucially reminds us to consider photographs as objects as well as images, but it is difficult to follow Edwards and Hart down this particular avenue, which can only be read as a way of warding off the fact that with digitalization so-called photographic ‘lives’ have become ultimately untraceable. Nevertheless, the horizon opened up by Trotman is worth exploring in greater depth, for the Polaroid image is a photo-object of considerable complexity and interest.

What sort of photo-object is a Polaroid print? Or, more importantly, what material social practices does it give rise to, what desiring networks do they participate in, and what unconscious investments animate them? This article examines two such practices. The first, Trotman has already begun to analyse when he writes of the machine as a party camera: ‘Taking a Polaroid is an event unto itself, contained within the party atmosphere....the picture does not commemorate the past party, but participates in the party as it occurs’ (Trotman, 2002: 10). In Polaroid photography the material activity of making the image, the fact that it develops on the spot rather than later in a darkroom, is, as Trotman says, an event in itself. So important has the ‘event’ of instant photography been in its history that we can speak of it as a ‘photography of attractions’, to borrow and modify a term of Tom Gunning’s. Gunning and others have argued that in early cinema ‘attractions’ took priority over narrative in seducing the spectator, with the filmic apparatus itself one of the main attractions, and it will be argued here that a similar principle applies for the user of Polaroid photography, for whom the spectacle of the technology is just as important as any image which

results from it. The second practice is what Edwards and Hart call a 'presentational form' – the tendency, found in both fine art and vernacular uses of Polaroid photography, to group large numbers of instant prints together in composite figures, or what will be called here 'Polaroid mosaics', to take into account the tile-like properties of the prints. Just as in the first practice the spectacle of producing the image equals or eclipses in importance the resultant image, so in the Polaroid mosaic, the print as combinatory object threatens to displace the print as individual image. How to explain this insistent surplus of object over image in instant photography? If the photo as object is, as Batchen, Edwards and Hart argue, always supplementing the image, perhaps it is because there is something missing in the image. As W.J.T. Mitchell has put it, images are often striking for 'their silence, their reticence, their wildness and nonsensical obduracy' and are therefore 'wanting', in both senses of the word (Mitchell, 2005: 10). Polaroid as photo-object then, but also as photo *objet a*.

### **Photography of attractions**

The Polaroid Corporation was formed in 1937 to manufacture and sell polarizing filters; its founder Edwin Land invented instant, or 'one-step' photography in the period after World War II and the first Polaroid Land camera for the consumer market was sold in 1948. The company filed for bankruptcy protection in 2001, as sales of instant film came under increasing pressure from growth in digital photography. In 2005, after changing hands twice, Polaroid was acquired by the conglomerate Petters Group Worldwide, which primarily used the name to sell LCD TVs and DVD players. Petters announced on Feb 8, 2008, that it was

discontinuing permanently production of Polaroid film, with the supplies to last until the end of 2009. In late 2008 Polaroid filed for bankruptcy protection for a second time as Tom Petters, Chairman of the Petters Group, was arrested for financial fraud. In April 2009 the company was purchased by a joint US-Canadian venture specializing in intellectual property rights. There are no plans to relaunch production of instant film.

In this Polaroid twilight visibility is so poor that familiar figures are mistaken for the strange and new. Thus Jeremy Kost: joint precipitate of the New York celebrity party circuit and a dying technology. Kost, self-dubbed 'anti-paparazzo', deals in a product – celebrity photographs – for which the demand is high, but the supply is too. As an amateur with no formal photographic training who uses a Polaroid camera to take pictures of the stars, Kost is sufficiently distinctive to have established a profitable niche in the market. Comparisons that have been made with Warhol (by curator Eric Shiner) are rather hopeful, but Kost's 15 minutes have so far extended to a couple of solo shows, short features in fashion magazines, and a regular column in *Elle Accessories*. His mission statement is available on his MySpace page as well as his commercial site, Roidrage.com:

Jeremy Kost has developed a unique approach to celebrity portrait photography....He doesn't hound them on the red carpet, nor does he sneak around outside their hotel rooms. He captures these stars in their own relaxed environment, being who they are naturally. He finds beauty in their reality. He looks for truth in natural light even when it is

exposing....He does not rely on lighting, make-up or styling, but rather plays with the moment to create magnificence in a hedonistic smile or true exhaustion. (Kost, 2008a)

The promise is an old one, and is of course integral to the fabrication of the star-image, to the process of mystification: the unguarded moments, layers of obstruction peeled away, the stars down to earth, and so on and so forth. Kost has in turn become an astral by-product, a third or fourth order celebrity in his own right, 'known on the New York circuit as "the Polaroid artist"' (Kost, 2008b).

This parasitism would be impossible without the Polaroid camera, which has an apparently alchemical function in relation to the stars. The key word here is 'access': 'the un-intimidating camera has earned him access to some of New York's most exclusive gatherings' (Lyon, 2006); it gives him 'the kind of access most photographers can only dream of' (Anon., 2008e: 94). The camera acts, then, as guarantee of safe passage to the inner sanctum of the skittish and suspicious star, protective of her image, fearful of those who would take it unasked. But here is Kost, bartering successfully with her, not keeping the image inside his camera and to himself (or worse, transmitting it electronically to a scandal sheet), but handing it over instantly, or at least in exchange for a few more that go into his pocket. The narrative edifice supporting this photographic practice is precarious though, because the illusion of privileged 'access' to the mysteries is combined with the incompatible notion of star-friendship. Kost

explains that he first used the camera to meet people in bars in an unfamiliar city: “‘Since I didn’t really know anyone in New York at the time, the camera served as a sort of social catalyst,’ . . . . He found that he made friends wherever he snapped photos’ (Lyon 2006). His branding requires therefore that he be on intimate terms with the inaccessible and distant star, with dissonant and contradictory anecdotes the necessary result: ‘Mena [Suvari] has become a dear friend of mine over the years. From time to time, she shoots her own Polaroids for my website, which I think is interesting; seeing celebrities doing things on their own terms’ (Anon., 2008e: 95). ‘Access’ means proximity, but stardom is defined by distance and separation, so Kost is in the awkward position – ‘seeing celebrities doing things’ – of supposedly being close-up but observing as if from afar.

Irrespective of such contradictions, Kost has belatedly stumbled upon some basic insights about the operations of Polaroid photography. In a sort of unwitting funeral oration he revisits as if for the first time all those attributes of the camera discovered long ago by its users and by the Polaroid advertising department. On the camera as ‘social catalyst’, for instance, we have this testimony in 1957 from Robert Doty, who was testing film for Polaroid: ‘Another delightful aspect of the camera is its function as an instrument of goodwill [at a vintage car rally]. I soon found that I was giving away more prints than I kept.’ (Doty, 1957: 8) John Wolbarst, author of *Pictures in a Minute*, the first handbook of Polaroid photography, extols the camera’s ‘ice-breaking’ virtues, claiming ‘There is no faster, surer way of meeting people than to unlimber a Polaroid Land camera and start shooting. . . . Start flashing away at a party or dance and you’ll be overwhelmed

by people who were strangers just a few moments ago.’ (Wolbarst, 1956: 121)

Just as the Polaroid camera’s status as ‘the ultimate party camera’ became enshrined very early in the company’s ad copy and in the uses of the camera, so this ‘ice-breaking’ capacity became standard in the lexicon. A Polaroid brochure from 1971 contains the following encomium from a user:

I’m not kidding. All I do is show up with my Polaroid Land camera and I’m the center of attention. Even strangers pose for me. They watch when I shoot. They hold their breath when the picture’s developing. And when I peel it off – *wow!* It’s a great ice-breaker, that camera. Whenever children are around, I feel like the Pied Piper. (Anon., 1971)

The same qualities are attributed to the camera in Peggy Sealfon’s *The Magic of Instant Photography*, a handbook from the 1980s:

Parties are also marvelous times for candid photography, and an instant camera often becomes a helpful ice-breaker. In fact, an instant camera often will motivate people to do unexpected things, just to see the immediate record of their behaviour. (Sealfon, 1983: 100)

In the discourse on the Polaroid as party camera, then, it is not so much that the Polaroid records the party, but that it *is* the party, the main attraction that gets things going.

This logic is extended with a slightly different purpose in mind in a section of *Instant Film Photography* (1985) entitled ‘Breaking the Ice’, where Michael Freeman praises the virtues of the camera in travel and street photography. Freeman claims that ‘instant film can actually help to change the *situation* in which pictures are

being taken: few things give such immediate pleasure as the gift of a photograph....It is the gentlest bribe you can offer someone whose cooperation you want' (Freeman, 1985: 118). He is especially keen to emphasize the value of instant photography in the face of cultural barriers. In a section titled – without irony – 'Overcoming Resistance', he warns that 'Photography without permission is, after all, a form of invasion of privacy, and whether this is offensive or not depends on the mood of the people, and on any cultural or religious objections they may have....If you sense wariness or hostility, however, the instant film gambit may save the day' (118). With the same sort of situation in mind, Sealfon notes that the camera can be 'useful in foreign lands' (Sealfon, 1983: 70). It is advice that Jeremy Kost takes instinctively when he 'discovers' Polaroid photography in his dealings with celebrities, who are also the cultural other, separated from us by their own impenetrable observances and rites.

The pages on which Freeman's comments are found are illustrated by photographs of 'indigenous' peoples absorbed in a Polaroid image of themselves that the photographer has presumably just handed over. In the iconography of Polaroid photography this scene of narcissistic absorption is the ur-image, absolutely central to Polaroid publicity and advertising from its outset in 1948; and it appears frequently in Kost's photos as well, with the pictured star cupping in her hand another just-taken image of herself (see Figure 2). Kost's activities are misrecognized as a novelty because the outmoded Polaroid technology has been forgotten, but then at the very point of its extinction, briefly flares up again into visibility, starkly different from the instant digital imaging that has displaced it.

That it produces an image immediately and *also* a hard copy makes it fleetingly seem an innovation that comes *after* digital photography. In this context it is also worth remembering some of the negative press that accompanied the arrival of Polaroid photography and continued to dog it for years, much to the dismay of such high profile promoters (and Polaroid employees) as Ansel Adams, who regretted in his autobiography that most ‘professional and creative photographers dismissed the process as a gimmick’ (Adams, 1985: 254). Percy Harris, reviewing the new camera in *The Photographic Journal* in 1949 gave a typically damning assessment, concluding that ‘the whole business seems nothing but a de luxe model of the old seaside “while-you-wait” snapshot camera’ (Harris, 1949: 62).

But why should the seaside camera be an occasion for scorn, and why need ‘gimmick’ be a term of dismissal? The OED tells us that a ‘gimmick’ is ‘an article used in a conjuring trick; now usu. a tricky or ingenious device, gadget, idea, etc., esp. one adopted for the purpose of attracting attention or publicity’ and also notes that one of its early users claimed the word was formed as an anagram of magic. With this definition in mind, and taking into account the Polaroid’s status as party camera and multi-purpose attention-grabber, instant photography can be seen as part of what Tom Gunning and other historians of early cinema have described as a system of ‘attractions’. The term ‘cinema of attractions’ was introduced in the mid-1980s by Gunning and André Gaudreault as a way of distinguishing early cinema (1896-1906) from the classical narrative cinema that later became the dominant mode. Rather than taking storytelling as its main organizing principle, the ‘cinema of attractions’ emphasized sensation and shocks,

with ‘display’, or what Gaudreault called ‘monstration’ as its defining characteristic (Gaudreault, 1990; Gunning, 1993). This cinema therefore holds close affinities with the fairground in the way that it ‘directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle’ (Gunning, 1990a: 58). One of its other main antecedents is the ‘magic theatre’ of the nineteenth century in which charismatic magicians often relied on new technologies to generate their spectacular effects (Gunning, 1990b: 96).

If we accept Dulac and Gaudreault’s hypothesis that ‘attraction’ can be applied to a wider range of ‘cultural series’ than film alone (Dulac and Gaudreault, 2007: 228), we might then speak of a ‘photography of attractions’, with a line of continuity running between the seaside while-you-wait camera, the automated amusement park photo booth (complete with theatrical curtain), the Polaroid camera as ‘ice-breaker’ and Jeremy Kost’s infiltration into the New York celebrity party scene. In her handbook, Peggy Sealfon actually calls the camera an ‘attraction’ and notes that

Another special advantage of traveling with an instant camera is the way it provokes people’s interest. People often gravitate to watch the ‘magical’ photo machine at work. (Sealfon 1983: 70)

Again there are striking parallels with early cinema, where ‘one of the attractions...was the cinematic apparatus, quite apart from what it showed’ (Elsaesser, 1990: 13). In Kost’s hands, then, the Polaroid camera has recovered its importance and value precisely as a gimmick, as a mode of attracting attention and publicity. Unlike the illicit snappers who seek out sunbathing stars, it is essential

that Kost *not* be surreptitious, and the explosive whir and click of the Polaroid camera, its Polaroid noise, is a boon in the din in which he seeks to be noticed.

Edwin Land himself recognized this gimmick potential in the cameras he invented, cannily demonstrating them live to gathered members of the press from 1947 onwards (see Figure 3). This practice reached its apotheosis in the early 1970s with the introduction of SX-70 technology, when Land became famous for his unorthodox entertainments at Polaroid Annual Meetings. In purpose built auditoria, sometimes ‘in-the-round’ (Anon., 1972a: 8), Land would conduct ‘a modern magic-lantern show’ (Anon., 1972b: 83) in which ‘the otherwise retiring scientist becomes a dashing imperial wizard, unveiling... products with theatrical flourishes’ (Kostelanetz, 1974: 54). For the 1972 Annual Meeting, where the SX-70 was launched, Polaroid converted 32,000 square feet of warehouse into a complete theatre space. Foreman Bob Chapman is cited in the *Polaroid Newsletter* explaining that his team ‘had to actually construct a completely new facility, installing such things as additional fans and theater lighting equipment, as well as making stages, demonstration platforms’ (Anon., 1972a: 8). That year Land ended up on the covers of both *Time* and *Life* demonstrating his new gimmick. Gunning has emphasized the importance of the early filmmaker as a ‘showman’ in the traditions of magic theatre, one who usually lectured charismatically over the film, and it is to this tradition that Land clearly belongs (Gunning, 1990b: 99). Given the cameras’ potential for ‘showmanship’, it was almost inevitable that when Polaroid built an over-size camera to produce large 20’ x 24’ prints, self-publicist

Andy Warhol posed on the stage of the Waldorf Astoria's grand ballroom in February 1978 for a series of instant portraits (MacGill, 1980: 2).

In the photography of attractions, the representational value of the image is not entirely negligible, but it has receded in importance, giving way to what might be called its 'demonstration-value', where it is the process and not the product that takes precedence. It is appropriate that Polaroid image-making should have a theatrical setting in Land's and Warhol's use of it, because in their hands photography functions above all as magic show: it is the spectacular display of the technology's workings which is most important; and attracting attention is the main aim of the operator.

### **Instantaneity, ice, and the technological unconscious**

What is the cultural significance of this 'photography of attractions'? As Raymond Williams warned in 1974, contra McLuhan, and many others have been warning since, a new technology cannot be considered as autonomously generating its own effects, but should rather be considered dialectically in relation to its cultural and social determinants. The meaning of a technology does not arise spontaneously, then, with its date of invention or dissemination (1947-8 with Polaroid), but rather only when the uses to which it is put become apparent. As Williams puts it, 'all technologies have been developed and improved to help with known human practices or with foreseen and desired practices' (Williams, 2003: 132). Indeed, to date a technology by its first appearance on the consumer shelves is simply to accede to the logic of the market in our analysis of technological

change. However, what Williams leaves out here is the possibility of a technological unconscious, whereby a new technology links into cultural determinants that are neither consciously 'known' nor 'foreseen'. It is not just that a new technology may lead to unanticipated practices, but that the manifest form of such practices hardly begins to account for what is at stake in them.

From this point of view it is tempting to read Edwin Land's invention as participating in a generalized culture of acceleration where the imperatives of a rapidly expanding consumer society post-WWII dictated 'instant gratification' as the order of the day. Might not the instantaneousness of Polaroid photography be seen as a leisure-world complement to the 'contraction of time, the disappearance of...territorial space' (Virilio, 1986: 140-1) brought about since the 1950s by a range of mainly military technologies of acceleration? Certainly, Polaroid image-making may contribute to, but certainly cannot be credited with producing, this state of affairs, which is hardly 'foreseen and desired' in the sense that Williams means. It is therefore worth remarking that the ingenious gimmick camera that ensured for fifty years the fortunes of the Polaroid Corporation was preceded by six years of wartime work by the company on various military visual technologies, work carried out for the United States government and armed forces.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During World War II Polaroid produced combat goggles, sighting devices, artificial quinine, and early heat-seeking missile technology. Victor K. McElheny credits Land with this sentence in Vannevar Bush's collectively-written post-war strategy document *Science: The Endless Frontier* (1945): 'What is required is the rapid invention and evolution of the peacetime analogues of jet-propelled vehicles, bazookas, and the multiplicity of secret, bold developments of the war' (Cited in McElheny 1998: 159).

But what of the more specific practice of Polaroid photography carried out by Kost and many others before him – the point at which the axis of acceleration meets the axis of gregariousness? What underlying cultural field can be deduced as the support of Polaroid’s function in ‘ice-breaking’<sup>2</sup>, or what Kost identifies as its ‘social catalytic’ benefits? It is of course risky to extrapolate in this way, but we could draw three provisional conclusions about the cultural parameters in which it is assumed normal that an offer of an instantly-produced image should prove a path to intimacy:

1. the assumption of an atomized and disaggregated social world where communal bonds are weak, and certainly not the primary mediator of social relations, ie, a world of strangers, but where, perhaps even as a correlative of this ubiquitous alterity,
2. from an optimistic or perhaps optimising perspective, every stranger is potentially a friend, whose otherness is far from absolute, and can in fact be quickly overcome through the appropriate technological support, that is to say,
3. the mechanisation of inter-subjectivity is taken for granted, it is self-evident.

Alienation and separation – ‘ice’ – may be taken as absolutely constitutive of the relation between self and other, then, but at the same time that ice is not

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<sup>2</sup> This idiomatic phrase comes from American English. The first use recorded by the OED is in 1883 by Mark Twain, who employs it ironically in *Travels in Mississippi*.

considered a serious obstacle. Instead, it is an invitation to an entrepreneurial approach to intimacy which accepts as given the need for a technological prosthetic, of which the photography of attractions is one instance.<sup>3</sup>

### **Polaroid mosaic**

In the photography of attractions *display* of the technology's workings is central, and in the second practice to be considered, the Polaroid mosaic, it is again a question of display, this time of the completed photo-object. The Polaroid mosaic is a form of photo-collage and as such is far from unique to instant photography.<sup>4</sup> The practice of combining photos with each other and with other materials to form composite images is not only long-established in fine art, but has a strong tradition in vernacular photography as well. In his discussion of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century photo-objects, Geoffrey Batchen shows how common was 'the impulse to group different photographs together in one object', which sometimes took the orderly structure of a 'grid' or 'portrait assemblage', but also less coherent patterns (Batchen, 2004: 26-8). Whilst participating in this tradition, Polaroid users have developed some highly distinctive variants on it. One such practice is the covering or coating of the body in prints, which is perhaps best described as a bath of Polaroids. Some examples:

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<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that in their 'social catalytic' function instant cameras anticipate camera phones. As Kato, Okabe, Ito and Uemoto note, 'camera users often described the act of taking and viewing photos when gathered with friends as itself a focus of social activity' (Kato, Okabe, Ito, Uemoto, 2005: 305). However, camera phones do not appear to have the same 'ice-breaking' potential as Polaroid cameras: the same study observes that the mobile phone 'reinforces ties between close friends and families rather than communal or weaker and more dispersed social ties' (Ito, 2005: 9).

<sup>4</sup> The term is not new. Works by Ray K. Metzker and Robert Heinecken have been described as 'photomosaics' (Warner Marien, 2006: 379) and Sealfon uses the term 'instant mosaic' for composite images by David Joyce (Sealfon, 159).

an online interview with Jeremy Kost is illustrated with a photo of Kost in a shallow bathtub (clothed) with numerous Polaroid prints spread out on the edge of the tub and on the bathroom floor outside the tub (Belonsky 2007)(see Figure 4); on the weheartpolaroid.com web-site photographer Dash Snow is shown photographed from above in a bathtub, submerged in Polaroid prints so that only his head, arms and feet are showing (see Figure 5); on the Flickr photo-sharing site a series of images, one of them entitled 'Requiem for a Polaroid', show a naked human body laid out flat, covered in Polaroid prints of what appear to be close shots of that same body. The practice is startling, even strange, but its repetition implies that it somehow goes without saying that Polaroid images should be poured onto a subject. Nor is this a new activity: as Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* (1977) testifies, it was conceived very soon after the invention of the SX-70 Polaroid technology that ejected the image automatically from the camera immediately after exposure (prior to 1972 and the SX-70, Polaroid film worked on a peel-apart basis). In this film, a listless Tom Ripley (Dennis Hopper) spreads himself out on his back on a pool table, SX-70 in hand, and proceeds to douse himself in Polaroid prints so that he too is eventually submerged in images in different stages of development.

Just as the image itself has a special mylar coating that allows it to develop in the light, so its producer-consumer (with the Polaroid image the two acts virtually coincide) treats it as a sort of supplementary skin in the case of the Polaroid bath. In popular practice, of course, as Trotman has observed, the tactility of the Polaroid print is absolutely central: its users shake the print, scratch it, write on it,

or bend its flexible surface between thumb and forefinger as Dash Snow does in the photo by Dave Schubert. The theme of immersion in a bath of Polaroid prints simply amplifies this logic of the Polaroid image as a skin-like interface between the body and the world. And on the weheartpolaroid web-site this logic reaches its natural conclusion with the merging of skin and film in an image of a woman's forearm tattooed with the distinctive frame (empty) of the SX-70 print (Anon., 2008b).

The fundamental feature of the Polaroid bath is the *multiplication* of prints, their massing together and overlapping with each other. This same principle is put to work in more orderly fashion in the Polaroid mosaic, in which individual prints become like tiles (Van Lier, 1983: xi) or scales. This type of collage gained prominence in the art-world in the early 1980s through the Polaroid 'joiners' of British painter David Hockney. Hockney would photograph a scene or subject with an SX-70 camera from a series of close-up positions and then recompose the segmented field by 'joining' the images together: 'When assembled in a grid to form the composite image, everything in the picture – whether foreground, middle ground, or background – is seen close-up on a shallow plane defined by the camera's focal length' (Knight, 1988: 34). The effect has been compared to cubism (Webb, 1988: 204), and Hockney himself argues that it is as close as photography can come to capturing binocular vision (Hoy, 1988: 56). Most of Hockney's 140-plus Polaroid joiners were completed in the first half of 1982 before he switched to a Pentax 110 and conventional film, arguing that the broad white border of the SX-70 image placed too many restrictions on the process

(Webb, 1988: 207). However, it could equally be argued that what distinguishes the Polaroid SX-70 mosaic from other forms of photcollage is precisely this prevalence of borders within borders, which calls attention starkly to the process of segmentation (see Figure 6).

The British painter was preceded in this technique of Polaroid mosaics by Joyce Neimanas and Stefan de Jaeger, Neimanas experimenting with Polaroid collages from about 1980 (Hoy, 1988: 56) and de Jaeger probably from 1979 (Webb, 1988: 206). The Belgian photographer de Jaeger, who generally concentrated on a single human subject to suggest motion and the passage of time, in fact accused Hockney of stealing the idea from him. It is probably more accurate to say that the idea was in the air, with Wim Wenders' protagonist in *Alice in the Cities* (1974), Philip Winter (Rüdiger Vogler), laying out his SX-70 prints on the beach like so many Tarot cards to be read collectively rather than separately, and Québécois film-maker Michael Snow experimenting in 1969 with the temporality of successively taken black and white Polaroid prints in *Authorization*. Whatever the source of the practice, if the images collected in *The Polaroid Book* are representative of uses made of Polaroid film by artist-photographers, the mosaic has become very common in Polaroid photography, with numerous instances anthologized there. What is more, the mosaic is in no way restricted to art-based photography, but is also very widespread as a popular practice. Web-sites such as [weheartpolaroid.com](http://weheartpolaroid.com), [polanoid.net](http://polanoid.net) and [savethepolaroid.com](http://savethepolaroid.com) all feature many variants of the Polaroid mosaic by amateur photographers who may or may not be aware of the art-world parallels to their work (see Figure 7).

Irrespective of whether it is gallery-based or a popular practice, then, something about the Polaroid image, especially in its white-bordered SX-70 manifestations, invites or even demands that the images be grouped together in mosaic style, or more haphazardly in the form of a bath of prints.

It is true that the SX-70 print has very specific features as an image. As Hockney notes, he stopped making joiners with Polaroid prints because he ‘realized that the Polaroid camera is essentially a close-up camera, because of the scale of the print’ (Hockney, 1986: 36). The image itself is almost square, while the print is only 3½ x 4½ inches when the white border is included.<sup>5</sup> Combined with the shallow depth of field of many of the cheaper versions of SX-70 technology, this means that the most satisfactory images tend to be those taken from a distance of 3-5 feet. But while these limitations are what brought Hockney to abandon the SX-70, they may precisely be what encourage the practice of combining a number of Polaroid images in a larger composite. Put simply, it is difficult to get much into a Polaroid print; for it to take on meaning, it requires support from other images.

As Geoffrey Batchen has remarked, the placing of photos in grids, or the allied practice of arranging them in albums, is often a way of getting the pictures to tell a story that they cannot tell on their own, since narrative is ‘always a weakness of individual photographs’ (Batchen, 2001: 66). This ‘weakness’ of photos has been

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<sup>5</sup> The border is often used for writing captions, but it was not put there in the first place for that purpose: it is a ‘pod’ which bursts to release a chemical reagent necessary for the ‘instantaneous’ development of the image.

famously developed from a psychoanalytical perspective by Christian Metz in 'Photography and Fetish'. In that essay, Metz notes that every photograph is marked by the cropping of space, by what is *excluded* from the frame: this 'off-frame effect...marks the place of an irreversible absence, a place from which the look has been averted forever' (Metz, 1985: 87). In other words, there is always something unavoidably missing from the photographic image, which is 'a cut inside the referent' (84). 'The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame', writes Metz, 'but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness' (87). From this perspective, the narratives provided by photo albums and grids are like hallucinations or dreams to counteract the off-frame emptiness generated by the photographic image. In the case of Polaroid photography this 'off-frame effect' is intensified by the small size of the image and the shallow focus which make close-ups optimal for image quality. What is more, the very materiality of the frame, stubbornly emphasizing the photo as object not just image, amplifies the crisis of off-frame absence as defined by Metz. The Polaroid image, that is to say, calls attention even more than usual to the *partiality* of a photograph. The Polaroid mosaic can therefore be read as a compensatory act to restore lost space. What the single Polaroid image leaves out, the composite seeks to make good.

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay by noting how 'photo-materialists' such as Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart have expressed a certain antipathy for the photographic image 'qua image' in their attempt to rescue photographs as what they call 'auratic'

objects. There are two drawbacks to this approach. Firstly, their ‘materialism’ is strictly limited: by concentrating exclusively on individual photo-objects (usually privileging older ones, where value has accrued with age), they do not take account of equally ‘material’ photographic practices where the photo-object itself may not be what is most important – as in the case of the *process* of Polaroid image-making, which is, as I have argued, a sort of photography of ‘attractions’.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the problem of the photo-image, naggingly, does not just go away if we turn our attention to the analysis of photos as objects. What Mitchell calls the image’s ‘silence ...reticence...obduracy’ persists, as does what Metz has identified as its troubling ‘off-frame effect’. Both the Polaroid mosaic and the photography of attractions bring the object-ness of the image to the fore, but what they perhaps also share in common is that they are ways of avoiding what is lacking in the image. Polaroid SX-70 photography promises an immediate, unmediated and singular image, but its material practices – the Polaroid mosaic and the photography of attractions – are less solutions to the photographic image’s partiality than further symptoms of that failure.<sup>7</sup> If it is the inevitable fate of image and object to always be severed from each other, the instantaneous Polaroid might appear to be an opportunity to reunify them, an opportunity taken up by those who would immerse themselves, bath-like, in the image as object. But as desires go this is even more chimerical than Borges’ map that covers the entire territory. If the single Polaroid image tells us too little, is far too small, too partial to signify, then the multiplication of images and borders merely splinters

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<sup>6</sup> The major exception to this object-centric restricted materialism in Edwards and Hart’s collection is Chalfen and Murui’s essay on Japanese Print Club photography.

<sup>7</sup> On the three key properties of Polaroid photography – speed, elimination of the darkroom, and lack of a negative, see Buse 37-9.

and fractures vision further. Without the mosaic, a windowed shard; with it, asyntax.

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