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# Polaroid, aperture, and Ansel Adams: rethinking the industry-aesthetic divide

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## **Polaroid, *Aperture* and Ansel Adams: Rethinking the industry-aesthetics divide**

### Abstract

This article takes the history of Polaroid photography as an opportunity to question a presupposition that underpins much thinking on photography: the split between industrial (ie useful) applications of photography and its fine art (ie aesthetic) manifestations. Critics as ideologically opposed as Peter Bunnell and Abigail Solomon-Godeau steadfastly maintain the existence of this separation of utility and aesthetics in photography, even if they take contrasting views on its meaning and desirability. However, Polaroid, at one time the second largest company in the photo industry, not only enjoyed close relations with those key representatives of fine art photography, Ansel Adams and the magazine *Aperture*, but it also intermittently asserted the ‘essentially aesthetic’ nature of its commercial and industrial activities in its own internal publications. The divide between industry and aesthetics is untenable, then, but this does not mean that the two poles were reconciled at Polaroid. While *Aperture* may have underplayed its commercial connections and Polaroid may have retrospectively exaggerated its own contributions to the development of fine art photography, most interesting are the contradictions and tensions that arise when the industrial and the aesthetic come together. The article draws on original research undertaken at the Polaroid Corporation archives held at the Baker Library, Harvard, as well as with the Ansel Adams correspondence with Polaroid, held at the Polaroid Collections in Concord, Massachusetts.

## **Polaroid, *Aperture* and Ansel Adams: Rethinking the industry-aesthetics divide**

[Edwin] Land could invent new cameras every hour and still would not increase the awareness of photography as a creative medium because his cameras are designed for the amateur.

-Peter Bunnell, 1972<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Icon, Instrument, Industry

In contemporary photography criticism it is hard to think of two more fundamentally opposed positions than those of Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Peter Bunnell. Bunnell – editorial assistant at *Aperture* in the 1950s, curator at MoMA, first endowed chair in the History of Photography (at Princeton), keeper of the Minor White archive – is part of a long line of partisans of photography as a fine art. Solomon-Godeau, along with Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Christopher Phillips, Richard Bolton, and others, spent much of the 1970s and 80s critiquing the partiality of those who made claims for the artistic autonomy or aesthetic essence of photography. In response to the legitimation of photography as art commodity by galleries in the 1970s, Solomon-Godeau and her fellow critical photography theorists argued again and again, through careful historical demonstration, that the aesthetic status of photography was not intrinsic to the medium, but wholly contingent. Institutions (museums, galleries, art schools) and their subjects (curators, collectors, educators, critics) were not discovering the artistic value of great photographs and photographers, but were in fact directly responsible for producing that value through their practices and operations. Furthermore, these critics were always keen to point out, following Walter Benjamin, that the mechanical means of production of photography more or less ruled out of court most claims about its conventional art-content.<sup>2</sup> Although all this critical work slowed not a bit the accession of art photography to the market place, it could at least be said that the critical photography theorists won the high ground in the Universities and the advanced journals of debate. That the suspicion of photography as art was in the ascendancy intellectually in the early 1990s is attested by a series of complaints made by Bunnell in his *Degrees of Guidance: Essays on Twentieth-Century Photography* about the excessive attention being

paid to 'the ontology of the medium' and its 'mass media connotations' at the expense of the 'individual artist'.<sup>3</sup> He doesn't name names, but 'postmodernism' in general is given the blame for this failure to take into account what really matters: 'creativity in photography – the individualized sensitivity of the photographic artist'.<sup>4</sup>

Given this background, it is little wonder that Solomon-Godeau seems impatient in her recent response to 'The Art Seminar,' a roundtable discussion published alongside written responses under the title *Photography Theory*. The title of her brief intervention – 'Ontology, Essences, and Photography's Aesthetic: Wringing the Goose's Neck One More Time' – gives a pretty clear sense of her frustration at the preoccupations of the roundtable, which spent a considerable amount of time debating, inconclusively, the indexicality of photography, as well as its supposed 'specificity' as a medium. For her, the doubting of photography's indexicality and the desire to identify what is specific to the medium are ways of smuggling back in the idea of the 'essentially iconic status of the photographic image' put about by 'John Szarkowski and his epigones'.<sup>5</sup> The result: 'a great deal of conversation about photography-in-the-art-world', and a foreclosure of the basic insight that 'the greatest use of photography is for manifestly unaesthetic purposes'.<sup>6</sup> The evident exasperation is of one who thought she had prevailed in the conceptual battle only to discover the next day that she has lost the war. In the face of this regression to an emphasis on the iconicity of photography, Solomon-Godeau urges a renewed attention to the instrumentality of photographs, to 'all those elements of photography that exceed the camera, the individual picture, and the individual photographer....not least, the industrial...structures that underwrite, shape, manufacture, and disseminate them'.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, it is on this very point that Solomon-Godeau is closest to agreement with Bunnell, who is of course one of those 'epigones' of John Szarkowski (long-time director of photographic collections at MoMA, populariser of the thesis of artistic autonomy of [some] photography, and *bête noire* of critical photography theory). Even if they disagree about what it means, Bunnell and Solomon-Godeau concur on the separation of 'photography-in-the-art-world' from the industrial or mass base of photography.

Whereas Solomon-Godeau argues that the former is a relatively insignificant manifestation of the world's photographic practice that has been made a privileged object of study at the expense of the latter, Bunnell affirms that the latter is of no interest for those who concern themselves with what really matters – photography as a 'creative medium'. They occupy opposite poles of the dispute, but they are in full accord over the definition of the field, the existence and isolation of the poles.

In the epigraph to this essay Bunnell invokes this fundamental disconnect and cites the case of Edwin Land, inventor of 'one-step' or Polaroid photography as his example. He made the comment in response to the commercial launch of the SX-70 by Polaroid in 1972, and his dismissal of the invention as a purely 'amateur' device was very much in line with the professional and critical consensus at the time.<sup>8</sup> However, the example is in fact a poor one. Not only did the SX-70 become the camera of choice for a whole array of 'artist-photographers' (Chuck Close, David Hockney, Lucas Samaras, Andy Warhol, as well as both Walker Evans and Minor White in the months before they died), but Polaroid Corporation had enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with such familiar fine art photography figures as Ansel Adams and Paul Caponigro, as well as nurturing many others, including Marie Cosindas and Rosamond Purcell. In fact, Polaroid had been instrumental, through the machinations of their long-time consultant Adams, in financially sustaining the photography magazine *Aperture*, which both Bunnell and the critical photography theorists recognize as absolutely central to the development of fine art photography in the USA. What is more, this industrial and technological giant of mass photo production engaged, from the 1950s onwards, in a range of activities – 'creative' photography workshops, collecting, fine art photography publishing, exhibitions – that have traditionally been conceived as the domain of institutions (museums, art schools, galleries) relatively autonomous from industry.

An examination of Polaroid's history as cultural actor serves a dual purpose, then: 1) it calls into doubt art photography's cherished (or despised, depending on your

viewpoint) claims of autonomy from the industrial base; 2) it forces a general reconsideration of the supposed split between the art-world and industry agreed upon by both Bunnell and Solomon-Godeau (and others in their respective camps). In addition, and on a larger scale, an outline of Polaroid's activities adds an extra dimension to the familiar narrative of fine art photography's brief inter-war institutional legitimation, its setbacks between the 1940s and 1960s and its eventual triumphant entry 'into the museum, the auction house, and the corporate boardroom' in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> This tale, as most convincingly related by Christopher Phillips, is one of discontinuity, with the arrival of Szarkowski at MoMA in 1962 bringing 'photography's gradual reconstitution as an art and as the museum's natural and special object of study'.<sup>10</sup> But as Anne McCauley points out, the aesthetic discourse on photography has existed more or less since its invention, and has never entirely gone away.<sup>11</sup> So, if photography was banished from the temple of art for a time, where did the partisans of its aesthetic take shelter? Fine Arts colleges, financially strapped little magazines, George Eastman House, Yosemite workshops, of course, but also, more surprisingly, with a representative of the photo industry whose products would seem most inimical to the idea of the photograph as art object. The recent demise of Polaroid Corporation – filing for bankruptcy protection in 2001, bought twice, ceasing to exist as an independent entity in 2005 and ceasing production of 'instant' film altogether in 2009 – actually makes it easier to piece together this early example of corporate-artistic collaboration: as part of its dissolution, the corporate archives were passed in 2006 to the Baker Library at Harvard where over two million documents are now open to scrutiny. Solomon-Godeau's project to demonstrate how photographs have 'from the outset been inextricably rooted in and are produced in specific situations, contexts, and instrumentalities' is still a vital one, and the history of Polaroid provides an excellent opportunity to pursue it.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1. Polaroid as a 'medium for artistic expression'

The first Polaroid Land camera, the Model 95, was sold at Jordan Marsh's department store in Boston in November 1948 for \$89.75. Unlike the SX-70 technology which automatically ejects from the camera an integral print which

develops in the light, the early versions of the Polaroid camera required its user to pull the exposed film from the machine, wait approximately a minute, and then peel the unusable negative away from the final print. At well over ten times the cost of the average amateur camera, the price of the Model 95, as well as its original exclusive distribution through high end department stores such as Jordan Marsh and Macy's in New York, clearly identified the new invention as a toy for the well-heeled.<sup>13</sup> When it was launched across the USA in the summer of 1949 it was accompanied by an advertising campaign in *The Camera* and other popular photography magazines. The campaign emphasised the novelty-value of the camera and confirmed as its target audience the affluent consumer at play. Among the slogans coined and repeated in the first years of publicity: 'Polaroid's picture-in-a-minute camera' (July 1949); 'see beautiful prints sixty seconds after you snap' (August 1949); 'move your darkroom into the daylight' (October 1949); and 'You're the life of the party with a Polaroid Land Camera' (February 1950).<sup>14</sup> This last advertisement, featuring the most famous of Polaroid ad-copy, is illustrated by an image of five well-dressed young white people admiring a just-produced Polaroid print of themselves; the woman holding the print wears a pearl necklace (see Figure 1). The same advert promises 'More FUN with a Camera – There's no thrill like seeing your pictures 60 seconds after you shoot them?'. The words 'fun' and 'thrill' come up again and again in these early ads: clearly, in its first manifestation, the Polaroid camera was primarily promoted as a kind of frivolous diversion for leisured classes unskilled in complex camera work.<sup>15</sup>

Then in 1950 there came an odd twist to this thus far consistent campaign. In the November issue of *The Camera* could be found a Polaroid advertisement featuring a photo of 'Dody' (Warren) by Ansel Adams (see Figure 2). The textual support for the image moves from the standard 'there's no thrill like seeing your pictures on the spot at the very moment they mean the most, while everyone is there to share the fun' to the decidedly more ambitious claim that 'Photographers everywhere are finding in the Polaroid...camera a powerful new medium for artistic expression...in brilliance of highlights and depth of shadows, the new black and white film gives results that challenge comparison with expert darkroom

production'.<sup>16</sup> This was followed by an ad in June 1951 in the same format, but this time with a portrait of Brett Weston by Warren, giving details about the photo being made 'in natural light, using close-up lens...and time exposure' (see Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> This short-lived departure from the main campaign appears to have ended with an ad in *Modern Photography* in January 1952. In this case, the photo by Bradford Washburn of a Mt McKinley base camp is provided 'courtesy of Boston Museum of Science' and we are told that the camera 'operated perfectly under tough conditions'.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the other ads, which trade almost exclusively on the fact of instantaneity, these three comment on aesthetic possibilities, on the quality of the film itself, and above all, name the photographers involved.

What conclusions can be drawn about this soon-abandoned supplement to an advertising policy geared almost entirely towards the amateur leisure market? Ansel Adams had been hired by Land in 1949 as a technical consultant to Polaroid, responsible for field testing new cameras and film and had been instrumental in the development of the new Type 41 black and white film promoted in this short series of ads. Dody Warren was a founding member, with Adams, of *Aperture*, and Brett Weston a member, with Adams, of Group f/64, while Washburn was a New England explorer and photographer who worked out of the Cambridge, Massachusetts area where Polaroid was based. This series of advertisements should therefore be read as an attempt to broaden the appeal of Polaroid photography, still in its infancy, beyond the unskilled affluent amateur and into the fields of professional and fine art photography. The small number of ads and quick termination of the series suggests that this attempt at legitimization failed, but it signals the presence within Polaroid of a lobby oriented towards the 'great aesthetic potential'<sup>19</sup> of instant photography, and not just any lobby, but one dedicated to the ideals of 'straight photography' in its most ideologically austere manifestation.

## 2.2. Back cover story: Adams, *Aperture*, Polaroid

We have learned through the years that if the photographer's statement about his work lists his cameras, there is no need to waste



time on the photographs. Currently, it is fashionable to include a clutch of Polaroid prints, and even photographers who know better – Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham – have fallen into this trap. Adams’ bias is understandable.

–Margery Mann and Sam Ehrlich in *Aperture*, 1968<sup>20</sup>

This abortive first foray into advertising by Adams at Polaroid was followed by a more modest but much more successful and longstanding initiative. In his capacity as consultant Adams negotiated for images taken on Polaroid film to appear on the back cover of the fledgling *Aperture* magazine from its sixth issue onwards in 1953. Every subsequent issue of *Aperture* until the 134<sup>th</sup> (Winter 1994) contained a reproduction of a Polaroid print. Until 1960 these images were mainly by Adams himself, with two contributions each by Gerry Sharpe and Nick Dean (also a Polaroid employee/consultant). For the next decade Adams provided more or less every second picture, and in the latter years images were selected for the ‘ad’ from the Polaroid Collections, which had been formally founded in 1973. The intermediary in the first instance was Meroë Marston Morse, who was Director of the Special Photographic Research Division and acted as the main point of contact for consultant photographers in the field. With a degree in art history from Smith College, she was particularly sympathetic to Adams’ photography-as-art programme, and the placing of an advertisement in a low circulation avant-garde magazine. But this ‘advertisement’ so-called was hardly of the same category as the ones found in the popular photography magazines. The images were reproduced to the highest standard, and had very little by way of textual accompaniment. For instance, the image on the back of issue 2: 3 has as a caption only its title, ‘Poplars, Owens Valley, 1952’, Adams’ name, and the following information in small print: ‘Polaroid Land Camera Model 110, Standard Polaroid Film (Engraving made direct from original print) and beneath this ‘Polaroid Corporation’ in bold and ‘Cambridge, Massachusetts’ (see Figure 4). In other words, no slogans, no direct plugs for specific merchandise, and from Issue 3:1 (1955), even the words ‘Polaroid Corporation’ were no longer in bold face.<sup>21</sup> These very muted ‘ads’ cost Polaroid \$100 per issue in the first instance (rising to \$3500 for the final ad)<sup>22</sup>, not including engravers’ expenses.<sup>23</sup> Given *Aperture*’s low circulation and precarious financial situation, then, this

arrangement was closer to a form of patronage than formal advertising. Nor was the back cover agreement the only monetary contribution made by Polaroid to the perennially cash-strapped magazine. Edwin Land was a 'sustaining subscriber' to *Aperture* for Issues 1-4, while from 1955 to 1967 'Polaroid Corporation' acted as a named 'retaining subscriber'. These subscriptions, at \$25 and \$10, were of course over and above the official rate of \$4.50, and the only other institutional sponsor of *Aperture* in the 1950s was the U.S. Camera Publishing Co. Others joined once *Aperture's* reputation and influence was established, but only Polaroid was there from the start.

*Aperture* is known for continuity (of editor Minor White from 1952-75 and publisher Michael Hoffman from 1965-2001), but also discontinuity (suspending production and threatening to disappear on two occasions, in 1953 and 1964). In its history, the unbroken forty-year relationship with Polaroid has to be seen as one of the greatest elements of continuity, with the understated style of captioning never changing in the over 125 issues in which a Polaroid image appeared on the back cover, even though well before 1994 the magazine had begun selling conventional advertising space inside its covers. Indeed, by the time of its discontinuation, the Polaroid ad had become quaintly anachronistic in its mutedness relative to the rest of the magazine (it was replaced on the back by, among others, Evian and Adobe PhotoShop). And yet, even though this forty-year arrangement is there for anybody to see, it makes no appearance in the official history of the magazine by R.H. Cravens which was published as part of the fiftieth anniversary issue in 2002. There are good reasons for this oversight: as Cravens' sub-title ('A Celebration of Genius in Photography') makes clear, the emphasis in the founding myths of the magazine is very much on 'profoundly gifted individuals' with 'no money'<sup>24</sup>; and when money is mentioned, it is long-term donor Shirley Burden who is credited, rather than the makers of frivolous party cameras. The contributions by Polaroid of 'artwork' and cash (certainly at a lower level than Burden, but far from insubstantial) would only cloud the narrative and even compromise *Aperture's* self-proclaimed independence from commercial interests in its early days. Nor does the official web-site which

outlines *Aperture*'s history, 'Aperture Foundation: A History of Excellence', make any mention of Polaroid, although it does of course reproduce many front covers of the magazine.<sup>25</sup> There is a sense here in which the reverse side always remains invisible, even if it is out in the open.

### 2.3. Against commercial photography: the compromises of 'dignified' advertising

Fortunately, the record of the Polaroid-*Aperture* dealings is available in the correspondence of Ansel Adams with Meroë Morse. This correspondence reveals that the relations between *Aperture* and Polaroid were by no means straightforward, and in fact threw up a range of interesting tensions and contradictions in relation to the magazine's stated ideology and overall project. The minutes of the meeting to found *Aperture* state very clearly the magazine's policy on advertising: the new periodical 'should depend almost solely on subscription for its existence, and that such advertising as there might discreetly be, would not be of a strictly commercial nature'.<sup>26</sup> When Ansel Adams first communicated with Polaroid about the ad, it is the same vocabulary that he uses:

APERTURE is now taking advertisements of dignified quality....The usual commercial type work is not desired – the advertisements would be simple and direct, and attractive.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of Adams' persistence the negotiations were protracted, and he had to regularly remind both Morse and Land himself that the ad would reach 'a considerable audience – highly selective', 'a highly selective group'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, there was no great urgency within Polaroid about this project, with Adams complaining to Morse at one point that Richard Kriebel (Chief of Publicity) was too preoccupied with conventional advertising to pay attention to a range of projects Adams had proposed.<sup>29</sup> Adams was therefore treading a fine line between protecting *Aperture*'s quarantine zone against 'commercial' photography whilst selling the ad to Polaroid as a way of acquiring cultural capital as well as attracting the notice of professional photographers. By July 1953 the issue had been resolved and Adams had submitted to Polaroid an image of river foam for

engraving, noting that ‘It is hardly a “National Ad for U.S. Camera’ but it suggests great possibilities’.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, as is implied by this comment, Adams had been waging a campaign against the Polaroid advertising department. For instance, he questions in one letter the stress on the amateur uses of the camera, and complains in others that many ads are misleading about the capacities of the cameras or making false claims about the conditions under which photos reproduced in ads have been made.<sup>31</sup>

Adams continued to advocate tirelessly for *Aperture*, taking every opportunity to highlight its ideals and its financial predicament, as in this letter to Land: ‘It is important that it preserve complete independence. It can use advertisements of the quality of Polaroid’s. But it should never get mixed up with the commercial photo rackets’.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, compromises were made in the *Aperture*-Polaroid relationship. As John Szarkowski points out, *Aperture* saw itself as the inheritor of Stieglitz and *Camera Work* in its ‘love for the eloquently perfect print’ and ‘intense sensitivity to the mystical content of the natural landscape’.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, Adams was extremely exacting in the reproduction of his Polaroid images for the back cover of *Aperture*, and many of the images he provided were of outdoor subjects where tonal quality and texture are privileged. In many cases Adams appears to have adapted to the restricted small print format of the singular Polaroid print by making close shots, such as ‘Engineer’s Center Mark, Golden Gate Bridge Pier’ (Issue 2: 4), ‘Log and Grass’ (Issue 3:2) (see Figure 5), ‘Detail, Tiburon Church, Calif.’ (4:1) and ‘Close detail, Burned Tree’ (4:2). Among the early issues were none of the large-scale landscapes for which Adams was (and is) best known. Even more strikingly, among these images were a number which might not be associated with the Adams ‘signature’ at all. These are the portraits of ‘Mr and Mrs Wilson, Napa, Calif.’ (3: 4)(see Figure 6), ‘Charles Sheeler’ (4:3) and ‘Rod La Rocque’ (5: 1). The atypicality of portrait photographs in Adams’s oeuvre is attested to by their extreme rarity among the over 700 Adams prints held by the Polaroid Collections.<sup>34</sup> Once again, the small print size may have been a contributing factor, but the result, like the 1950 picture of ‘Dody’, is a closer

proximity to Polaroid's main business – snapshot photography – than Adams might have intended or desired.

The editor of *Aperture*, Minor White, also had direct dealings with Polaroid, working in a consultant capacity in 1956-7. White was leader, at Rochester Institute of Technology, of a 'Pilot Project' into the use of Polaroid materials in the teaching of photography, a project for which Polaroid provided free cameras and film. In his reports back to Polaroid, White was largely positive about instant film, and he also published an article about the experience in *Aperture*, 'Pilot Project RIT: on the trail of a trial balloon'. White's correspondence shows, however, that he did not have a completely free hand in this article, since Richard Kriebel insisted on changes, wanting to know 'what actually happened after you got over the novelty phase; about the effects of each successive print on the photographer, the sitter and the next print'.<sup>35</sup> White agreed to make the changes, but got his own back by noting in the article that the Project participants had replaced the 'advertising slogan' of 'Pictures in a Minute' with their own: 'the immediate image'.<sup>36</sup> This may have been a way of reasserting *Aperture's* independence, but there is no hiding the fact that White was working as an employee of Polaroid, and it was the company that had commissioned the article. In 1959, the magazine published yet another article on Polaroid photography, this time emphasising its usefulness in 'Photographic feedback'.<sup>37</sup>

It could be argued, of course, that far from compromising *Aperture's* aspirations to freedom from commercial contamination, this story of its involvement with Polaroid simply illustrates the conditions under which it heroically laboured for the idea of a pure photography. There is something in this argument, but only if we accept the possibility of a fundamental fissure between aims and outcomes. Critical photography theorists in the 1980s identified *Aperture* as one of the key early proponents of a concerted effort to 'narrow photography' by emphasising the 'autonomy of the image' over its manifold other uses<sup>38</sup>; more specifically '*Aperture's* publishing philosophy' stressed 'the valorization of individual artistic genius by the excision of photography from meaningful political or social

contexts'.<sup>39</sup> In this capacity, the magazine was one of a number of cultural agents instrumental in the 'institutional consolidation and triumphant legitimation of photography as a fully "auratic", subjectivised, autonomous, fine art'.<sup>40</sup> Again, the vocabulary differs from the sort Peter Bunnell might employ, but there would be general agreement on *Aperture's* importance as a fore-runner to photography's entry into the art gallery and the art market. The 'triumph' of fine art photography was concomitant, then, with its acceptance as a commodity for exchange. The paradox here is that the commercial photography to which *Aperture* was so steadfastly opposed already took for granted the commodity status of the photograph in its most common manifestation – in advertising. The vanguardist purity of the likes of Minor White required that the aesthetic value of the photograph be promoted without an eye to the financial compensation of exhibition value, but holding out for the high ground of aesthetic value ultimately meant that *Aperture's* inheritors could reap far greater rewards than they might have expected from the regular commercial work disdained by the magazine. As for the Polaroid 'ads' that placed aesthetic considerations above the imperatives of the 'commercial photo rackets', do they not in fact anticipate a time when fine art and advertising photography have become indistinguishable, indeed symbiotic?

### 3.1. Inside Polaroid: the vicissitudes of the 'aesthetic' 1948-85

The case of Polaroid and *Aperture* shows a greater interaction between the industrial base of photography and photography-as-art than is normally taken to be the case, but it is far from exceptional in the history of the instant photo company. Indeed, where *Aperture's* official history fails to acknowledge Polaroid's close involvement in its origins, Polaroid itself eventually seized on such activities, especially from the 1970s onwards, to retroactively narrate its own development as a 'creative' company sympathetic to photographer-artists. The relations with Adams were of course especially valuable in this exercise, for Adams' stock rose exponentially with the legitimation of photography and its entry into art galleries, and Adams takes pride of place in any display of Polaroid's cultural credentials. This is not simply corporate window dressing on the part of Polaroid: it is true that from its very early days, and especially in the rhetoric of Land himself,

‘creativity’, especially of the scientific variety, was central to Polaroid’s internal ideology; and that in the late 1960s Polaroid developed out of its system of technical consultants a very generous Artist Support Program, which donated film and equipment to photographers in exchange for a varying number of prints. This latter arrangement was formalised in 1972 with the opening of the Clarence Kennedy Gallery at Polaroid HQ, and with the establishment of the Polaroid Collections in 1973. These Collections, which became the repository of work from the Artist Support Program, had as their building block a set of (non-Polaroid) prints purchased by Adams on behalf of Polaroid in 1956, including images by Edward Weston, Dorothea Lange, Eliot Porter, Margaret Bourke-White, Eugene Smith and Minor White.<sup>41</sup> The activities of the Artist Support Program and the Polaroid Collections have been ably documented by Arno Rafael Minkkinen as a shining example of what is known as ‘artist-corporation collaboration’.<sup>42</sup> But as the less than perfectly smooth dealings with *Aperture* suggest, Polaroid’s attitude to the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of photography was neither consistent nor entirely coherent. If for Ansel Adams, Minor White and *Aperture*, the task was very clearly to carry out the separation of fine art photography from all other commercial forms, the situation within Polaroid itself was rather more complex and changeable, with competing imperatives. Something of this complexity can be grasped through a survey of two further periodicals, this time published inside the company: the Polaroid Annual Report and *Polaroid Close-Up*.

### 3.2. Illustrating the Polaroid Annual Reports

Polaroid Corporation was originally formed in 1937 to manufacture and sell polarizing filters, but by 1952, 81% of its turnover was in camera and related sales, a figure which had risen to almost 97% by 1958.<sup>43</sup> For a company almost exclusively devoted to photography, it therefore made sense that its Annual Reports not only presented facts and figures, but also featured examples of finished products in the form of Polaroid images. However, as Adams noted with concern about the 1953 version, many of the images in the Report were not in fact made on Polaroid film, although he thought it essential that they should be.<sup>44</sup>

Adams' advice appears to have been taken, and over the years the Reports become assiduous in detailing the types of Polaroid film (there were many) on which reproduced photos had been taken. His advocacy also appears to have enabled the introduction in the late 1950s of 'fine art' photographs into the Annual Report, but they had to rub shoulders there with other kinds of photograph, and this incursion was in any case short-lived, although the 1970s would see their return under new conditions. In any case, the Annual Reports at no point allowed for the narrowing of photography sought by the fine art lobby and decried by the critical photography theorists.

Over the period 1955-1985, Polaroid Annual Reports make use of four basic types of image:

1. The purely illustrative image which displays a new piece of merchandise: a camera, a roll of film, a pair of sunglasses, or other product. In these images, the photograph as photograph is rarely at stake, for it is the content of the picture which matters most.

This is not the case for the other three types, which all appear as examples of photographs in themselves, whatever their content.

2. The vernacular or amateur snapshot. This type of photography of course formed Polaroid's core business, and the Annual Reports feature innumerable images where domestic happiness prevails and children, pets, and babies are the protagonists.
3. Examples of the professional, industrial, and business uses of Polaroid photography, ranging from real estate, photojournalism, and police work through to highly specialised scientific applications in stereoscopy and micrography. These images are often identified as taken on, for example, the MP-3 or CU-5 cameras.
4. The photograph as aesthetic object. In this case, the photographer is always named and the image itself is usually framed in such a way as to call attention to its status as art-image. Whereas types two and three above are shown for their indexical or use value, this fourth category is presented for its iconicity.



Inevitably, these categories often overlap and are regularly porous with each other. For example, the front and back cover of the 1959 report feature images from *Portfolio #1*, a book by John Wolbarst which drew on a photo competition run by *Modern Photography* for Polaroid camera users. On the inside of the report, meanwhile, there is a 1¾ page spread by Nick Dean of a ‘Snowbank, Malden’.<sup>45</sup> The latter clearly aspires to the Adams-*Aperture* school of US landscape photography, but the former also have ‘aesthetic’ pretensions, even if they are not necessarily the sort to get the approval of the f/64 group. Equally, the photomicrograph of the retina of a toad on the front cover of the 1977 report is there to display the technical accomplishments of the film and its great indexical value, but it is also obviously meant to be ‘beautiful’. If the discourse of fine art photography aims to bracket a small number of photos for their iconicity, the Polaroid Annual Reports, by mixing all sorts of images, contribute to a confusion of such categories.

The image by Nick Dean in the 1959 Report was the second in a series which started with a 1½ page spread by Adams of Yosemite Falls in the 1958 Report, and was followed by a similarly presented image by Paul Caponigro in the 1961 Report.<sup>46</sup> Even if the 1958 Report had a boy with an ice cream cone on the front and a clown face (good for illustrating contrast) on the back, fine art photography would therefore appear to have secured a privileged place within Polaroid’s self-presentation in this epoch. However, and in spite of what the retroactive histories might state, from 1962 and for about the next decade and a half, the Adams brand of photography was pushed aside in the Annual Reports. Initially this was because of the introduction of instant colour film, which was first sold in 1963. Subsequent Annual Reports emphasised above all the possibilities of colour film in snapshot photography as well as a range of business and science uses, such as the front cover in 1964, with its image of a photoelectric stress pattern, or the cover in 1967 featuring a cross section of unexposed Polacolor positive sheet magnified 320 times. Colour film at this point was of course absolutely inimical to those in the photograph-as-fine-art camp, so for an Annual Report lushly illustrated in colour, there would have been no place for Adams and his fellow

travellers. Instead, it was the usefulness of photography that was conveyed by the images in the Annual Reports, as well, of course, as its kitsch-aesthetic dimensions in vernacular photography.

It is important to know about this long-term exclusion of photography as aesthetic object from Polaroid's official public documents, because it gives a more objective position from which to view its gradual return in the mid 1970s. The 1976 Report has on its front and back cover a reproduction of a section of tapestry from the Boston Museum of Fine Art, photographed on the large format 20' x 24' camera, but it is the 1977 Report which really signals a change of strategy. Here there are four images from the *Faces and Facades* touring exhibition, with the following text: 'The contemporary emergence of our large format materials has produced a surge of photographs uniquely fresh and beautiful both because of their striking sharpness and because distinguished artists are responding freshly to their own art when the results are immediate'.<sup>47</sup> On the next page, the Report then makes a claim for the basic continuity of this strategy in Polaroid's history: 'For a long time after the Land concepts were first introduced, many professional photographers were reluctant to consider one-step photography a medium of high artistic expression. We at Polaroid, on the other hand, have from the start believed in the great expressive potential of our kind of photography'.<sup>48</sup> *Faces and Facades* was the first national tour of Polaroid photography as art-object, and of course coincided with the more general ascension of photography to the gallery in this epoch. In subsequent Annual Reports, starting with the one in 1978 containing five images by Ansel Adams, Polaroid's association with art was consolidated as one of the basic strands of its commercial activity. So, the *Aperture* dream of photography as autonomous art was belatedly given full recognition at Polaroid, but in a form that compromised the fundamental demand for the separation of useful from aesthetically-oriented photography. The Annual Reports acknowledge art photos as a distinct category, but they are forced to share the stage, and on equal terms, with diagnostic imaging of blood flow (1980), micrography of a butterfly wing (1984), or images of magnified silver halide (1987). Even if the official company discourse now

insisted on 'high artistic expression' and 'great expressive potential', the juxtaposition of images 'authored' by artists with images 'authored' by a powerful magnifying lens can only serve to undermine that discourse.

### 3.3. An ambiguous in-house art journal: *Polaroid Close-Up*

An interesting by-product of Polaroid's 'rediscovery' of its tradition of support for art photography is the magazine *Close-Up*, or *Polaroid Close-Up*. This periodical, which took on a number of forms, was published inside Polaroid, and is described by A.D. Coleman as 'a journal of substance...the most serious and...content-heavy photography journal ever published by a corporation in the United States'.<sup>49</sup> A letter from the editor Constance Sullivan inserted in the Spring 1984 issue gives a sense of the magazine's ambitions. Sullivan locates *Close-Up* 'in the tradition of *Camera Work*' and claims that Polaroid is 'dedicated to publishing the preeminent photo journal of the day'.<sup>50</sup> However, this manifesto statement, presented for what was in effect a re-launch of the magazine, belies the earlier history of *Close-Up*, which can only be described as schizophrenic. When it was first printed in 1970 it concentrated primarily on applications of instant photography in science and technology. An editorial in 1971 identified its readership as taking in 'pathologist, industrial photographer, engineer, editor, research technician, radiologist, or commercial artist',<sup>51</sup> but as early as 1974 it was including Polaroid images by and commentary on Rosamund Purcell, Walker Evans and Lucas Samaras. By the late 1970s the editorial policy had stabilised with the standard statement that 'Instant photography sits in a vastly interesting position at the intersection of art and science',<sup>52</sup> a remit capacious enough to allow a single issue to include articles on Ansel Adams and Marie Cosindas; on holography; on a rephotographic survey project; on large format cameras; on Arnold Newman portraits; and on macrophotography.

Such eclecticism was evidently considered incoherent and untenable, for an editorial in 1981 observes that 'an advertising executive remarked the other day that the only thing that hasn't changed from issue to issue is the name of the magazine. In trying a variety of approaches, we have inevitably failed in some of

our efforts'.<sup>53</sup> This crisis in identity led to another attempt in 1982 to define the magazine's expansive mission:

*Close-Up*, the magazine of instant photography, includes illustrated articles which address photography as it relates to science and to medicine, on aspects of the history of the medium, and on commercial and advertising as well as fine art photography.<sup>54</sup>

The move in 1984 to situate *Close-Up* in the tradition of *Camera Work* (and therefore *Aperture*) must be seen as the final abandonment of the longstanding ambition of the magazine to be comprehensive in its coverage of the heterogeneity of photographic practice. Coleman claims that *Close-Up* in its earlier incarnations had been little more than a product promotion vehicle but that under the editorship of Marnie Samuelson and Constance Sullivan it became a serious independent journal.<sup>55</sup> However, it could equally be argued that the eventual narrowing of the magazine to a concentration solely on fine art photography was not to escape a promotional function but to intensify it. As Solomon-Godeau noted around the same time, the role of photography 'criticism' of the sort found in *Close-Up* was 'to serve as a more or less sophisticated public relations...apparatus'.<sup>56</sup> It did not matter if a particular article was critical of this or that 'artist' or exhibition, because the overall effect of *Close-Up* in the 1980s was to affirm the intrinsic value of photography as autonomous and auratic. Indeed, the case could be made that *Close-Up* was most interesting in its moment of schizophrenia and eclecticism, when it refused to make value judgments in favour of any single type of photographic practice. Its attempt to explore the 'intersection of art and science' was doomed because for photography to be hailed as an art, the science must be repressed, forgotten. As Anne McCauley puts it, 'the medium is not an art unless its defining characteristics are ignored',<sup>57</sup> and *Close-Up*'s early remit was precisely to consider those technical characteristics and potentialities alongside the supposed 'aesthetic dimension'. After that it was just another photo-art magazine in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

#### 4. Conclusion

When Ansel Adams came to Polaroid as a consultant in 1949 it was his technical skills in evaluating film quality and camera equipment that the company valued most. With the exception of a few important individuals such as Meroë Morse, it is probably safe to say that Polaroid was largely indifferent to Adams' broader project that found expression in *Aperture*. This is not to downplay Adams' enormous influence at Polaroid, where his advocacy was instrumental in improvements of speed and quality of the film, technical areas in which Polaroid became leaders in the field. Edwin Land was of course very supportive of Adams, but when he wrote in 1949 that developments in one-step photography were 'essentially aesthetic' because they 'make available a new medium of expression to the numerous individuals who are not given to drawing, sculpture or painting', his notion of the aesthetic hardly matched with that of Adams.<sup>58</sup> For Adams it was the vision and print-making skills of the individual photographer that made great photos, whereas for Land, the ease of use of the Polaroid camera meant that anyone could produce a solid standard of image. That it was the technology that was doing the making in Land's version of the 'aesthetic' is clear from a letter to shareholders in the 1976 Annual Report where he claims that thanks to 'the ever increasing simplicity of our cameras...the population of aesthetically competent photographers is rapidly expanding'.<sup>59</sup> So, in the 1950s Polaroid provided funding and refuge for an idea of photography whose time was yet to come, without in fact sharing the ideological precepts of that idea. When its time did come, Polaroid discovered that it had been quietly supporting this project in a small way for a long time, and accordingly adjusted part of the company history. The result was a number of publications and activities in the 1970s and 1980s that were simply piggy-backing on developments in the photo-art-world. Polaroid thus found itself in the odd position of endorsing as valid the divorce of photographic industry and art when so many of its practices heretofore had confirmed the opposite to be the case.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in ‘Polaroid’s Big Gamble on Small Cameras’, *Time* (June 26 1972), 80-5, 85.

<sup>2</sup> See Walter Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-34*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 507-30.

<sup>3</sup> Peter C. Bunnell, *Degrees of Guidance: Essays on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Ontology, Essences, and Photography’s Aesthetic: Wringing the Goose’s Neck One More Time’, in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, 256-69, 261 & 265.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 269 & 256.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Buse, ‘Surely Fades Away: Polaroid Photography and the Contradictions of Cultural Value’, *Photographies*, 1: 2 (Autumn 2008), 1-18, 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Phillips, ‘The Judgment Seat of Photography’, *October*, 22 (Autumn 1982), 27-63, 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Anne McCauley, ‘The Trouble with Photography’, *Photography Theory*, ed. Elkins, 403-30, 421.

<sup>12</sup> Solomon-Godeau, ‘Ontology, Essences’, 268.

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<sup>13</sup> See Mark Olshaker, *The Instant Image: Edwin Land and the Polaroid Experience*, New York: Stein and Day, 1978, 61-3.

<sup>14</sup> The earliest I have been able to date this slogan is 1949. In a Polaroid publicity brochure collating consumer feedback it is credited to a J.R. Hayes of Champaign Illinois who is cited thus: ‘The first 7 days I took 64 pictures, all flash. I was the “life of the party”...very good for my ego. Everyone I show it to wants one.’ ‘What owners say NOW about the Polaroid Land Camera’. 1949. Box 5, Folder 14, Polaroid Corporation Collection, Baker Library Historical Collection, Harvard Business School.

<sup>15</sup> See also Peter Buse, ‘Photography Degree Zero: Cultural History of the Polaroid Image’, *new formations*, 62 (Autumn 2007), 29-44.

<sup>16</sup> Polaroid ad, *The Camera*, 73: 11 (November 1950), 11.

<sup>17</sup> Polaroid ad, *The Camera*, 74:6 (June 1951), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Polaroid ad, *Modern Photography*, 16:1 (January 1952), 3.

<sup>19</sup> The favoured terminology of Adams in his correspondence with Polaroid and in his publications on instant photography. See, for instance, *Polaroid Land Photography*, a high-quality handbook. See, for instance, Ansel Adams, *Polaroid Land Photography*, rev. edn, Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978, 34. All quotations and citations from the work of Ansel Adams is given with with the permission of The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All quotations ©2008 Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

<sup>20</sup> Margery Mann and Sam Ehrlich, ‘The Exhibition of Photographs: Northern California’, *Aperture*, 13:4 (1968), 10-17, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Jennifer Uhrhane of the Polaroid Collections for pointing this out to me.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Barbara Hitchcock of the Polaroid Collections for this information.

<sup>23</sup> Ansel Adams, Letter to M.M. Morse, 8 June 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

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<sup>24</sup> R.H. Cravens, 'Visions and Voices: A Celebration of Genius in Photography', *Aperture*, 168 & 169 (Fall and Winter 2002), Parts I and II, 5-11, 42-51 & 4-13, 38-45, 5.

<sup>25</sup> 'Aperture Foundation: A History of Excellence', URL (consulted 3.09.2008)

<http://www.aperture.org/store/pdfs/timeline.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Peter C. Bunnell, *Minor White: The Eye that Shapes*, Princeton: Art Museum, Princeton University, 1989, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ansel Adams, Memo to M.M. Morse and Richard Kriebel, 29 January 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

<sup>28</sup> Ansel Adams, Letter to Edwin H. Land, 14 April 1953; Letter to Morse, 8 June 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

<sup>29</sup> Ansel Adams, Letter to M.M. Morse, 22 April 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA., 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ansel Adams, Letter to M.M. Morse, 14 July 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, Letter to Morse, 22 April 1953; Memo to M.M. Morse, 1 May 1953; Letter to M.M. Morse, 10 July 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

<sup>32</sup> Ansel Adams, Letter to Edwin H. Land, 25 September 1953, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.

<sup>33</sup> John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, New York: MOMA, 1978, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Again, I am grateful to Jennifer Uhrhane for pointing out to me the oddity of these portraits within Adams' work for Polaroid and in general.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Kriebel, Letter to Minor White, 23 July 1957, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA.



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- <sup>36</sup> Anon. (Minor White), 'Pilot Project RIT: on the trail of a trial balloon', *Aperture*, 5: 3 (1957), 107-11, 107.
- <sup>37</sup> Anon. (Minor White), 'Polaroid Land Photography and the Photographic "Feed Back" Employed with Informal Portraits', *Aperture*, 7: 1 (1959), 26-30.
- <sup>38</sup> Richard Bolton, 'Introduction', in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, ix-xix, ix.
- <sup>39</sup> Catherine Lord, 'What Becomes a Legend Most: The Short, Sad Career of Diane Arbus', in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Bolton, 111-23: 121.
- <sup>40</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics', *Social Text*, 21 (1989), 191-213, 194.
- <sup>41</sup> Barbara Hitchcock, 'When Land Met Adams', *The Polaroid Book: Selections from the Polaroid Collection of Photography*, ed. Steve Crist, Köln: Taschen, 2005, 24-29, 26.
- <sup>42</sup> Arno Rafael Minkinnen, 'Thirty Years of Polaroid Photography in Boston', in *Photography in Boston: 1955-1985*, ed. Rachel Rosenfield Lafo and Gillian Nagler, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, 136-53.
- <sup>43</sup> *Polaroid Annual Report 1952*, 3; *Polaroid Annual Report 1958*, 5.
- <sup>44</sup> Ansel Adams, Memo to M.M. Morse, 23-25 March 1954, Polaroid Collections, Concord, MA., 1.
- <sup>45</sup> *Polaroid Annual Report 1959*, 8-9.
- <sup>46</sup> *Polaroid Annual Report 1958*, 8-9; *Polaroid Annual Report 1961*, 8-9.
- <sup>47</sup> *Polaroid Annual Report 1977*, 27.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>49</sup> Coleman, A.D. 'Writing and Publishing About Photography in the Boston Area, 1955-1985', in *Photography in Boston*, ed. Rosenfield Lafo and Nagler, 119-135, 127.
- <sup>50</sup> Constance Sullivan, 'Letter to Subscribers', n.d. (Spring 1984).

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- <sup>51</sup> ‘Editorial’, *Close-Up*, 2: 3 (October 1971), 2.
- <sup>52</sup> ‘Editorial statement’, *Close-Up*, 10: 1 (Winter 1979), inside cover.
- <sup>53</sup> ‘Editorial’, *Close-Up*, 12:1 (1981), inside cover.
- <sup>54</sup> ‘Editorial’, *Close-Up*, 13:1 (August 1982), inside cover.
- <sup>55</sup> Coleman, ‘Writing and Publishing About Photography’, 127.
- <sup>56</sup> Solomon-Godeau, ‘Living with Contradictions’, 191.
- <sup>57</sup> McCauley, ‘Trouble with Photography’, 409.
- <sup>58</sup> Cited in Allan Porter, ‘Evolution of One-Step Photography’, *Camera*, 53: 10 (1974), 11-58, 11.
- <sup>59</sup> Edwin H. Land, ‘Chairman’s Letter’, *Polaroid Annual Report 1976*, 4-8, 8.