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# Surely fades away: Polaroid photography and the contradictions of cultural value

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Surely fades away:

## Polaroid photography and the contradictions of cultural value<sup>i</sup>

### Polaroid's double bind

For those unfamiliar with the history of Polaroid, it invariably comes as a surprise to hear of the company's longstanding, intimate, and fruitful affiliation with the photographer Ansel Adams. At the height of the Polaroid Corporation's success, Adams was of course the jewel in the crown of the cultural wing of its operations, and 700 of his unique prints still form the backbone of the Polaroid Collections held in Concord, Massachusetts. Adams, who served as a consultant to Polaroid from 1949 until his death in 1984, was himself far from shy in his promotion of Polaroid and its film, and dedicates a chapter of his autobiography to his friendship with Edwin H. Land, founder of Polaroid and inventor of 'one-step' or instant photography (*Autobiography* 247-60).<sup>ii</sup> Why then do Adams and Polaroid seem such strange bedfellows for those who do not know this story? No doubt it has something to do with the very contrasting popular public images that the photographer and the company enjoy. In the canon of twentieth-century American fine art photographers, Adams figures in the very first ranks, if not in the top position itself, whereas the term 'Polaroid', justifiably or not, tends mainly to carry associations of mass snapshot photography. Adams, a photographic interventionist, is perhaps best known for his complicated Zone system and the infinitesimal adjustments he made to aperture, shutter speed, focus, pre-exposure, and so on, in controlling the making of the image; Polaroid consistently took the lead in the photographic industry in automating all aspects of picture-taking, gradually removing responsibility from the camera operator for all functions except selection and framing of subject matter. Adams

was a fetishist of the ‘perfect print’, strongly advocating the importance of darkroom skills in the production of the final image.<sup>iii</sup> Polaroid did away with the darkroom, or at least miniaturised it and made it portable, eventually excluding all possibility of the photographer’s intervention in the developing process by producing in 1972 a camera that mechanically ejected a sealed print that developed in the light: the SX-70 (See Plate 1). However, far from being some sort of special case or exception to the rule, Polaroid’s relationship with Adams simply crystallizes a problematic of value that runs right through the history of instant photography: its simultaneous association with both high and low levels of social and cultural distinction.

Perhaps nothing sums up this odd situation better than Polaroid film’s reputation for deterioration. As Billy Bragg’s ‘St Swithin’s Day’ has it,

The polaroids that hold us together  
Will surely fade away  
Like the love that we spoke of forever  
On St Swithin’s day.<sup>iv</sup>

Bragg is by no means the original source for this prejudice, but he gives voice to a common perception that a defining feature of the Polaroid image is its *impermanence*. It is as if, just as it magically ‘fades up’ from a grey green murk after exposure, the Polaroid image is destined to return to that formless slime. The fact that, strictly speaking, this isn’t true (all colour film fades, especially if exposed to light or humidity, and Polaroid images, if stored in darkness and optimum temperatures, will retain their original colours perfectly well<sup>v</sup>) is much less important than the persistence with which it is taken to be so. Whether or not Polaroid snaps actually fade is almost beside the point: their meaning in culture is as that which fades,

and a collective hallucination of their fading follows on from this. The reasons for the hallucination are not hard to find. Polaroid images, generated quickly and consumed on-the-spot, have been judged against the principle that living fast means dying young. This and other unfounded slanders were a source of immense frustration to Polaroid's highly innovative team of research chemists and camera designers, who since the late 1940s had been at the very forefront of developments in film technology *and* image preservation. But as Bragg's lyrics make clear, to accuse something of fading is not necessarily to denigrate it. In fact, quite the opposite, for it is the supposed fragility of the Polaroid image in Bragg's song that makes it an ideal metaphorical partner for a love that is valued even more precisely because it was doomed not to last. (The fact that most Polaroid prints are positives with no usable negative, and therefore unique artefacts not subject to mechanical reproduction, can only add to their perceived fragility: ephemeral, they are also irreplaceable.) Here, then, summed up in a familiar paradox of love poetry, is the basic double bind of cultural value as it relates to instant photography: an extraordinary scientific and technological achievement results in a consumer product so simple and efficient in its uses that it comes to be thought of as the 'degree zero' of photographic skill (Buse 38). What follows in this article is an archaeology of the sources of these meanings of Polaroid photography – the way it has been constructed by the photographic press, by Polaroid itself (in official statements, in market positioning, and advertising strategies) and by popular representations of the technology – and a demonstration of the basic contradictoriness and instability of these meanings.

### Polaroid and the photo experts

Classes start tomorrow and the members of the group have been trickling in all day. I have as a roommate a Mr Shorey from somewhere in the Midwest who has the most phenomenal collection of camera gear I have ever seen in my life. I sit on my bed

clutching my 110 and saying, 'But I *like* it'. –Nick Dean, Polaroid Consultant, to Meroë Morse, Director of Black and White Research Laboratory, June 13, 1957.<sup>vi</sup>

Polaroid announced its invention of 'one-step' photography in 1947, and in 1948 released on the consumer market its first 'picture-in-a-minute' camera, the Model 95 Land Camera. This camera produced sepia prints, but a black-and-white film was soon made available in 1950. Colour instant photography was introduced in 1963, with the film still in the peel-apart format of the first cameras. The camera and 'integral' film which now dominate the iconography of Polaroid photography, and to which the Billy Bragg song refers, only came in 1972. The small print (3 ½ x 4 ¼ in) with the white border, wider at the bottom, could develop in the light and was dubbed 'absolute one-step' photography by Edwin Land. The inventions of 1947 and 1972 generated wide press coverage, with *Time* and *Life* both devoting cover stories to Land and his 'magic camera' in 1972, but to determine what cultural value the instantaneous image-making system took on, it is most instructive to survey the reactions to the cameras and film in specialist photography magazines aimed at professional and serious amateur photographers.

Magazines such as *Modern Photography*, *Minicam Photography*, *Popular Photography*, *The British Journal of Photography*, *The Camera*, and *U.S. Camera* are directed at an informed and expert readership, but they also function to constitute that audience as experts. As Carolyn Marvin has argued in relation to advances in electricity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a group which has privileged knowledge of and access to rapidly developing technology tends to form 'a self-conscious class of technical experts seeking public acknowledgement, legitimation, and reward in the pursuit of this task.' (61) And as she notes, even if technology is a product of scientific and rational endeavour, it is often to the

advantage of a thus constituted field of experts to cultivate an aura of mystery or magic around their expertise. (56-8) At a mundane level, these magazines serve to publicise and assess the latest developments in shutters, lenses, film types, light meters, darkroom chemicals, photographic paper, and so on. At the same time, the fetishisation of camera and film technologies in specialist photo magazines is an absolutely essential exercise in the definition of the photo-expert's domain and the establishment of the figure of the non-expert, or amateur photographer. This figure of gentle condescension, the naïve snapshotter, is at best just an eye and a finger, unable to bring to bear on the image-making process the array of technological controls that the professional or 'serious amateur' masterfully manipulates. And yet, as John Szarkowski has pointed out, the third quarter of the twentieth century – the epoch of Polaroid – saw a rapid and marked erosion of this divide between the professional photographer and the amateur, with the amateur assuming responsibility for 'a score of ...vernacular functions that were once thought to require the special skills of a professional photographer' (14), largely thanks to developments in camera technology. The erosion of this divide has been accelerated even further in the past fifteen years by digital technology which 'made it possible to *see intuitively as the lens/camera sees* without years of training' (Rubinstein and Sluis 13). If the response of the expert magazines to Polaroid announcements in 1947-8 was largely benign, while in 1972-3 it was decidedly ambivalent, even anxious, it is probably because the intervening years saw so many threats to the sovereignty of the expert photographer.

#### Technological marvel or beguiling toy?: Early reactions and Polaroid's response

When Edwin Land publicly demonstrated the 'one-step' camera for the first time on February 21, 1947, he did so at the annual meetings of the Optical Society of America rather

than in a specifically photographic forum. (In fact, he did a demonstration for the press at the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York before the formal scientific meeting). This choice of venue made sense, since up to that point, Polaroid was a company known primarily for its research in polarizing filters, with only a limited foray into photography during the war with ‘vectograph’ technology. Although Land and Polaroid had no photographic pedigree, what they did possess already in abundance was scientific legitimacy. By definition worshippers of science and technology, the photo-expert magazines were almost unanimously rapturous about the ‘spectacular discovery which marks a great advance in the photographic process’ and often just reproduced verbatim Polaroid’s own press copy about potential uses of the new camera (‘Polaroid President Invents’ 52). Ralph Samuels in *Minicam Photography* drew on a familiar language used to explain the occult mysteries of technology by describing Land as ‘the chief wand-waver’ who conjured ‘something besides a rabbit...out of the hat.’ (20) But there were also hints of the reputation that Polaroid Land cameras would soon develop for requiring little skill and allowing for little expert manipulation. *American Photography* noted that ‘The operator does not have to know anything about the mechanical processes involved. All he does after the usual focusing and shutter setting, is to push the button and pull a tab’ (‘The Land Camera’ 149); and the reviewer of the Model 95 for *U.S. Camera* sniffed at the camera’s lens and its operation: ‘a bit disappointing in this day and age of fine lenses and shutters. The method employed takes it out of the “professional class” of equipment’ (‘One-Minute Photography’ 76). The most damning evaluation came from the British-based *Photographic Journal*, unhindered by the boosterism infecting American magazines: ‘The user gets just the one photograph he has taken, and there is no negative from which further prints can be made, nor can the pictures be enlarged. In fact to me the whole business seems nothing but a de luxe model of the old seaside “while-you-wait” snapshot camera.’

(Harris 62) The complaint about no negative was in fact repeated by most magazines, which invariably noted that this absence more or less excluded the camera from commercial and professional applications.<sup>vii</sup>

Polaroid, with one of the most ambitious research programmes in the photo industry, addressed many of the complaints and criticisms of the experts, producing in short order a copy service, a high resolution panchromatic film (1955), an ultra-fast (3000-speed) film, a camera back allowing instant film to be used with non-Polaroid (ie professional) cameras (1957), and eventually an instant print which also provided a reusable negative (1961). Nevertheless, the original doubts of the experts stuck and Polaroid continued to be thought of as an extremely clever manufacturer of photographic toys. Making toys can be a very lucrative enterprise, and in the 1950s and 1960s Polaroid was by far the most rapidly growing member of the photo industry, but this reputation for producing clever machines with trivial applications did not square well with the intellectual ambitions of a company strongly devoted to primary research and physically located directly between two of the country's most prestigious educational institutions, Harvard and MIT.<sup>viii</sup> As technical consultant and a chief lobbyist for improvements in the film and cameras, Ansel Adams in his correspondence with Polaroid regularly warned the company that they were not being taken seriously by the professional photography fraternity. In 1953 he complained that advertising for Polaroid cameras 'has served to place emphasis on the casual, amateur use of the camera and process' with the result that 'Most people think of it as a semi-toy.' (Letter to Morse 1) It is a concern that he reiterates more formally and publicly in his autobiography where he writes that most 'professional and creative photographers dismissed the process as a

gimmick' or 'a beguiling toy' and that he was considered 'a bit eccentric because of my enthusiasm and championing' of it (*Autobiography* 254).

It is in this context that Adams' manual of *Polaroid Land Photography*, first published in 1963, must be considered. Along with John Wolbarst's *Pictures in a Minute* (1956) and John Dickson's *Instant Pictures* (1964), Adams' manual generates a sort of counter-discourse to the slanders of triviality levelled at Polaroid photography. As a genre, book-length camera manuals might be thought of as one-off precipitates of the specialist photo magazines, with a similar implied readership. Most cameras come with instruction guides, but not all have entire books dedicated to their usage, and only more 'serious' users of a camera will turn to such literature. The three Polaroid manuals have slightly different addressees: Wolbarst's is the most populist, aimed at the potentially 'creative' (6-7) photographer unskilled in the darkroom; Dickson's techno-philic volume invokes 'the expert user' (39) as its audience; and Adams addresses his glossy book to 'all photographers, and especially to the serious amateur and professional' (ix), while, as might be expected, emphasising the 'great aesthetic potential' (34) of the film. Each in their own way, these user's guides emphasise the range of skills necessary to successfully operate a Polaroid Land camera, that is, they convey the very *complexity* of the whole process. For example, while the early reviewer in *American Photography* wrote dismissively of 'pulling the tab', Adams, Dickson and Wolbarst devote entire sections to this action and how it must be carried out very precisely in order to ensure high image quality. And yet, despite these attempts to recover for Polaroid photography some of the supposed dignity of the 'serious amateur', the three writers, and especially Wolbarst, admit, implicitly or explicitly, that the simplicity of operation of the camera is its defining feature, even its main attraction. As Dickson puts it at the very start his book, 'A process so

startlingly simple might not, at first thought, seem to need a book, nor even a solitary paragraph, since it can all be summed up in a single sentence' (7) All three of these texts were written before the introduction in 1972 of the SX-70, the extraordinary ingenuity of whose chemical processes made redundant many of the elaborate skills Adams, Dickson and Wolbarst painstakingly detail. So simple was its operation that it would seem ludicrous to have a specialist manual dedicated to SX-70 photography, and as the reactions of the expert press to this new camera testify, it only underscored the ways in which responsibility for image-making in Polaroid photography was devolving increasingly from the photographer to the machine.<sup>ix</sup>

#### The SX-70 and the redundancy of the expert

Just as in 1947-9, in 1972-4, the technophilia of the specialist photo press was given full voice in its reception of the new SX-70. The *British Journal of Photography* called it 'one of the crowning technological marvels of an age' (Crawley 1003) and *Popular Photography* said 'the camera is truly an example of the kind of instrument we might have cradled in a time capsule so that our progeny can know what our state of the art was in the field' (Goldberg 80). But the praise was deeply qualified by doubts as to the usefulness of the camera for the serious photographer. For Norman Rothschild, the SX-70 'lacks certain features that could make it a fully creative tool for some advanced amateurs and pros. The lack of any control over depth of field, due to the practically idiot-proof exposure automation, is one problem....The other is lack of control over shutter speed....The Polaroid SX-70 appeals to, and is eminently suited to, a mass market' (121). That idiots and the mass market are one and the same thing was implied as well by a leader comment in *BJP*: 'The interest in the new self-developing material will be centred on two extremes in the photographic world. The first,

the mass market at which it is directed, is interested in the freedom which such systems provide....There is little or no interest in the mid-range of the photographic community until one arrives at those who are curious about the scientific and technical nature of the invention and who, indeed, may not themselves make much practical use of it.' ('Comment' 359) The policing of boundaries between amateurs and experts continues then, but there are also signs that the camera threatens to place the amateur on an equal footing with the expert. Hal Denstman, for instance, confesses 'I was embarrassed at times to admit how simple picture-taking could really be' (41), and he is echoed by Douglas Kirkland, who writes, 'I also found that the camera handles easily. As I jokingly remarked to one of my models, "There's so little for me to do, it's almost embarrassing'" (87). As this little anecdote of imperilled virility demonstrates, when the professional photographer looked into the SX-70, he could see figured there his own potential redundancy. And in the publicity in advance of the camera's launch, the specialist magazines, normally barometers of technological change, were themselves made redundant, as Polaroid gave the story directly to mass circulation magazines. Simon Nathan in *Popular Photography* reported: '*Time* magazine and then *Life* scooped the world's photographic press, each with cover stories on the new SX-70 Polaroid Land camera. Photo-writers were able to read about this dandy new camera before they even got a preview model to try' (8).

As Carolyn Marvin has observed, the expert's jealous guardianship of the secrets of technological know-how has usually been a gendered affair, and it only takes a very cursory browsing of a range of specialist photo magazines from 1945-80 to confirm that their addressee is almost uniformly masculine. In this context, it hardly needs stating that when the expert photographer is impotently left with 'so little...to do', the technology has stopped

serving as obedient guarantor of masculine competence and instead threatens to supplant that competence entirely. This is not to say that Polaroid technology heralded a new age of egalitarian thinking in photography. In fact, in their early strategizing and advertising campaigns for the first cameras, the company tended simply to endorse existing gendered meanings of technology. According to Peter Wensberg, Land ‘nagged’ his design team that the camera was meant for ‘the mothers of America’ and therefore ‘must be kept simple, mother-proof’ (92). A Polaroid publicity brochure from 1954 explains that ‘Many women who have been baffled by the complexities of other high-quality cameras get perfect results on their very first pictures’ and goes on to note that children also have much success with the camera (5).<sup>x</sup> In *Pictures in a Minute*, meanwhile, John Wolbarst invokes Land’s fantasy mother as the ideal target for the easy-to-use Polaroid, since ‘she may not have the time or desire to master the technicalities of conventional photography’ (161).

With this logic, Polaroid’s marketers were sticking to the tried and tested path already laid out by Kodak, which, as Don Slater points out, ‘heavily targeted women and children as prime consumers of snapshot photography, both as symbols of the extraordinary ease of taking pictures (even they could achieve photographic success) and as the most identified with the emotional continuity and commemoration of the domestic.’ (54-5) Polaroid also initially subscribed to Kodak’s ‘assumption...that the bottom-end cameras are used by women and children, the paterfamilias being the photographically upwardly mobile consumer’ (Slater 54): in the 1950s its cheapest camera, the Highlander, was aimed at women consumers, while the Pathfinder – ‘deluxe, precision-built...a magnificent photographic instrument’ (Polaroid Publicity Brochure 1955) – was aimed at men. But by the late 1970s and early 80s, when various models of the SX-70 had come to dominate snapshot camera

sales, Polaroid had abandoned the myth of masculine competence with technology, or rather, radically reconfigured it. As a British television advert in 1986 for Polaroid starring the comedian Hugh Laurie made clear, it was now the male expert who was dispensable, an endangered being. In the ad, Laurie, a bumptious figure who fancies himself something of a master photographer, brings out the various trappings of photographic gear – light meter, tape measure, spotlight – only to be disappointed in each case by a patient voice-over that tells him the camera itself will do all these tasks for him. When Land announced his discovery in 1947, newspaper writers quickly adapted the famous Kodak slogan (‘...We do the rest’) and declared ‘You Press the Button and the Camera Does the Rest’. If it was precisely this aspect of Polaroid cameras which drew the scorn of the photo experts, it may have been because they implicitly recognized the threat the cameras posed to the very terms of their expertise.

#### Mass consumption, luxury value, ‘prestige’

In spite of the best efforts of Adams and others to lend them legitimacy, then, Polaroid cameras were treated for the most part with condescension by the photo-writers of the world. Unlike the case of Kodak analysed by Slater, however, Polaroid photography was endowed with other forms of cultural distinction. As an ad for the Model 350 appearing in *The New Yorker* and similar titles in October 1970 had it, ‘The privilege of doing practically nothing has its price’. By the time Billy Bragg sang about them, SX-70 style cameras were cheaply available and therefore ubiquitous (according to Richard Chalfen, almost 50% of U.S. households contained some sort of instant camera in 1983 [14]), but this was far from the case in 1973, and even less so in the early years of Polaroid cameras. The Model 95 may have been marketed as a snapshot camera in 1948, but retailing at \$89.75, it was well beyond

the reach of the average snapshot enthusiast, who in the same year might have acquired a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye for \$5.50.<sup>xi</sup> In a letter to specialist dealers in 1955, Polaroid Sales Manager Robert Casselman describes the Land camera as ‘America’s Number 1 camera in the fine camera field’ which gives a sense of how Polaroid positioned itself in a market to which it was a newcomer. The reviewers agreed, doubting it would displace the box camera as ‘a standard household item’ since it ‘costs too much to attract the legion of camera users who place a top limit of \$15 on their shutter boxes’ (Reynard 121) Mark Olshaker claims that the first cameras were defined by their ‘exclusivity’ (62) and were primarily a product for the ‘well-heeled’ (82) and everything suggests that this was also the case for the expensive SX-70 on its launch. Looked down upon by the experts, Polaroid cameras were nevertheless luxury goods. There is no contradiction here; in fact, for Pierre Bourdieu, the one is the corollary of the other in photographic practice:

possession of equipment, even a considerable range of equipment, seems to be an effect of income rather than a sign of dedication; precisely because of their accessibility, the most expensive cameras and accessories are not necessarily associated with an enthusiastic practice. (64)

In other words, the symbolic value of an expensive representative of ‘the fine camera field’ matters much more to its owner than any purely photographic functions it may be capable of performing. If we return briefly to the Hugh Laurie ad, Bourdieu helps us realize that there is also a class dimension to the figure being mocked there. The would-be expert flummoxed by a camera that does it all for him is in fact part of a tradition of satirical censure of the ‘vulgarity’ of the ‘passion for photography’, ‘which reprimands the naïve enthusiasm of photographic fanatics and gibes at their ridiculous paraphernalia’. (Bourdieu 68)

If we follow the logic of Georges Bataille in such matters, it is precisely the perceived uselessness of an expenditure that is an index of its luxuriousness. The utilitarian photo-writer, skilled in the intense labour of aperture, focus, lighting, may scoff at the Polaroid camera, but then perhaps it is not utility that is at stake. Mass production of course militates against luxury, but even under these circumstances, there are methods to create at least the simulacrum of luxury. Instead of being sold through camera distributors, the first Polaroid cameras were made available exclusively in high end department stores, generally just one in each city, starting with Jordan Marsh in Boston, and progressing to Macy's in New York and so on. 'We went to department stores', explains J.H. Booth, 'because we had the kind of item that department stores value as prestige merchandise' (30). A similar strategy was deployed for the launch of the SX-70, which, as well as containing extraordinary advances in chemistry, was something of a small miracle of design, the way that it folded into a pocket-sized book shape when not in use. Land also demanded that the camera be covered in cowhide – 'Expensive, hard to handle, difficult to bond to the surface of the camera' (Wensberg 211) – and instructed the design team 'to put back the wrinkles' they had taken out 'so that buyers would know the material was real leather' (Gallese 49). The leather theme was extended to the special presentation sets made for the SX-70, including an 'Executive Attaché by Hartmann', 'made from high quality belting leather' and sold with the 'deluxe SX-70' for \$385 (See Plate 2). Charles Eames, the noted designer, was enlisted to make a short film about the camera, and Laurence Olivier, the very incarnation of high culture, was convinced to do his first television advert as part of the publicity campaign. Candice Bergen, who was also part of this campaign, when asked why she agreed to do the ads, replied, 'Polaroid seemed to be very compatible with my interests in terms of

photojournalism. And then I'm a sucker for prestige.' It is worth noting that these various claims for the 'prestige' of Polaroid cameras are not necessarily incompatible with its longstanding status as a toy. Toys are precisely those things which have no utility beyond a dedication to play, and for this reason are valued by the idle rich, whose indulgence in a range of non-productive activities amounts to luxuriating in an extended childhood. When Land appeared on the cover of *Life* demonstrating the SX-70 in October 1972, he was pictured surrounded by children fascinated by the magic toy. The persistence of Polaroid's association with child users and consumers, while another contributor to its low value in photographic terms, was paradoxically also a key index of its luxuriousness as a commodity for adults.

There are plenty of inconsistencies in this picture, though, and Polaroid's claims to luxury commodity status were always precarious. The original and highly expensive SX-70 did not recoup its costs and Polaroid had to quickly push through cheaper and cheaper versions of the technology, culminating in the 'One-Step' camera of 1977, which went on to be the world's widest selling camera for four years, so hardly an exclusive object. And as a necessary income-generator to subsidise the enormous research outlay for the SX-70 system, Polaroid had already released in 1965 the Swinger, its cheapest ever camera at \$20, which was aimed at a youth market and which, crucially 'got them into Drugstores' – a far cry from Jordan Marsh and Macy's ('Polaroid' 35). The Swinger was then followed in the late 1960s by the even cheaper Colorpack II. Indeed, the pressures of the market and the imperatives of growth are rarely compatible with an emphasis on exclusivity, even if it is the job of advertising in mass culture to tread the fine line between populism and the promise of luxury.

### 'Creativity' and cultural value: Polaroid kitsch

If simple economic realities ensured that the Polaroid camera remained protean in its commodity identity, within the Polaroid company itself there was a fairly consistent expression over the years of its ideals or 'vision'. When Edwin Land introduced the one-step process to the Royal Photographic Society in 1949, he claimed

The purpose of this investigation is essentially aesthetic, although the realm of investigation is, of course, scientific and technical. The aesthetic purpose is to make available a new medium of expression to the numerous individuals who are not given to drawing, sculpture, or painting. (qtd in Porter 11)

Almost thirty years later, in a letter to Shareholders in 1977, Land wrote in much the same terms

It is gratifying...that with the ever increasing simplicity of our cameras combined with the present characteristics of the film, the population of aesthetically competent photographers is expanding rapidly. Thus some 15 billion pictures after we first expressed our hope...our dream is being realized. (8)

The same basic ambition – to open the possibilities of 'creative expression' to a broader portion of the population – is echoed by Polaroid literature throughout its history. This might all be dismissed as so much standard boilerplate (after all, more photographers equals more sales, and Polaroid relied on film sales for the majority of its turnover) except that Polaroid always had a distinct praxis to back up its official corporate theory. From the late 1960s, the company's generous Artist Support Program provided film and equipment to both established and young photographers, who were asked to donate one image per grant to what eventually became the Polaroid Collections. In addition, Polaroid ran numerous

photographic workshops for its own employees, many of these led in the 1950s and 60s by Ansel Adams. This training often resulted in non-photographer employees becoming professional photographers, and for many years from the mid-1970s Polaroid ran annual photo competitions among employees, events which also produced new photographers, with the resultant exhibitions even going on national tours. It is also the case that many fine artists with no formal training in photography have produced photographic work with Polaroid materials since they require comparatively little in the way of special skills. Peter Schjedahl cites in particular Lucas Samaras, Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Chuck Close, and William Wegman in this category (11).

The corporate encouragement of 'creativity' in photographic practice was of course extraordinarily flexible in its application and open to many interpretations. Adams, the fine art purist and head ideologist at Polaroid, tended to insist on the special formal properties of the film, its high ASA speed, its high resolution, its unique tonal qualities. These features were enlisted in the wider project of 'straight photography' in which Adams was a central participant, and the images he produced on Polaroid film were marked by their departure from vernacular norms of composition and subject matter and a tendency to privilege abstraction. 'Creativity', from this point of view, emphasises the unique vision of the individual photographer. A very different understanding of the term can be found in Wolbarst's *Pictures in a Minute*, which confidently announces that the Polaroid 'is the most creative camera of them all' (7). What he means by this, it turns out, is that with a Polaroid camera, you can achieve the same sorts of technically competent picture-taking that the serious amateur would expect to achieve with a more complicated camera. His technical advice on shadow, lighting, close-up, exposure and framing is as conventional as the 'themes'

that he picks out for possible subject matter: 'People and windows (148), 'Tips on group shots' (152), 'Still life, hobbies' (156), 'Pets around the house' (158), and a long section devoted to those staples of everyday photography, babies and mothers. When mass cultural forms (the baby or pet photograph) begin to have pretensions of aesthetic value, they risk being labelled as kitsch. Indeed, if, as Tomas Kulka suggests (43-4), kitsch happens when mass forms pretend to the aesthetic distinction of the elite forms which they have displaced, then the whole Polaroid-Landian project, with its uneasy oscillation between low and high levels of distinction, begins to look like a monumentally kitschy enterprise. The typical kitsch product, Adorno argues, attempts to fuse 'the art of a former time' (501) onto a present object, and it is in this light that we should consider the high-quality leather on the SX-70 of which Land was so proud. For what is it but an attempt to bind the values of an artisanal culture onto a mass cultural object?

The possibilities inherent in the kitschy contradiction between high and low cultural value in Polaroid photography have not gone unexploited. In what is best described as an operation in meta-kitsch, William Wegman in the late 1970s and early 1980s posed his weimeraner, Man Ray, for a series of photographic portraits. As Wolbarst's manual makes clear, 'pets round the house' is a key sentimental category of popular photography. The sentimentality of the genre is invoked by Wegman in the title of a volume in which the Man Ray portraits appear – *Man's Best Friend* – and in such images as 'Actor's Nightmare' where the dog poses with a baby against a traditional studio portrait backdrop (Wegman 47).

Anthropomorphised dogs are of course a notorious subject of the kitsch tradition (as in C.M. Coolidge's series of paintings, *Dogs Playing Poker*) and Man Ray appears in many of his portraits in various bits of human garb, or, for instance, in bed with another dog in 'Ray and

Mrs Lubner in Bed Watching TV' (27). In a later image held by the Polaroid Collections, 'Serving Trout', three weimeraners pose in a bucolic fantasia of a bygone American backwoods life (see Plate 3). As the photo credits for *Man's Best Friend* tell us, the images 'are all one-of-a-kind 20-x-24-inch Polaroids, made on Polacolor II and Polacolor ER film' (62). To produce such large prints requires a very large camera and Polaroid built the first of these seven-foot high instant cameras in 1976 as part of a project to make reproductions at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In 1979 they opened the first dedicated 20x24 studio in Cambridge, MA, and subsequently installed the cameras in similar studios in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Prague (Columbus 116). Because of the unwieldiness of the camera, artists and photographers who wanted to make use of it were obliged to come to the dedicated studio and operate the camera with the assistance of a team of technicians. So, just as Polaroid cameras, in cheaper versions of the SX-70 technology, were saturating the photography market, here was an instant photography system whose scarcity and expense of use meant that the pictures produced on it were automatically endowed with the aura of the art object. Even though they have undergone reproduction and re-sizing to appear in book form, Wegman's images, we are reminded, are 'one-of-a-kind', and so the double bind of cultural value and Polaroid remains operative: the name of the dog may be Man Ray, but the pretensions of high culture must be invoked tongue in cheek, for if not, the kitsch is purely unintentional.

#### Kitsch, obsolescence, nostalgia

Meanwhile, the supposed impermanence of the Polaroid image has taken on a rather literal meaning of late. With instant photography pushed to the verge of obsolescence by emergent new media and cheap digital cameras for the consumer market, Polaroid

Corporation filed for bankruptcy protection in 2001, changed hands twice, and is now a subsidiary of Petters Group Worldwide. Polaroid, no longer an independent corporation, is still located at its 'World Headquarters' in Waltham Massachusetts, but it has shed large numbers of staff and abandoned its once vaunted photographic research programmes. The cameras and film are still available in some forms, but that market is dwindling year on year, and production of the film is to be discontinued entirely in 2009. Like any once popular commodity on the brink of extinction, Polaroid cameras are now the subject of widespread nostalgic sentiment, as attested by the much frequented Polanoid.com website and by their appearance in films as representative of quaint or archaic visual technologies (*Boogie Nights*, *Wallace and Gromit and the Curse of the Were Rabbit*). That is to say, they have become kitsch in its undiluted form. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), Jean-Pierre Jeunet's hymn to a timeless and quirky Paris, cleansed of genuine social antagonism. Jeunet uses all the tricks of new media technologies in order to construct a world which apparently pre-dates those technologies. Coming to the fore in this digitally manufactured environment are such outmoded media objects or sites as an ancient cathode-ray tube television, photo-maton booths, old-fashioned video sex shops and, of course, Polaroid prints. In an effort to reengage her father with life, the protagonist Amélie arranges for his cherished garden gnome to be kidnapped. An air stewardess friend then takes the gnome on her voyages, photographing him with a Polaroid camera in front of diverse world monuments, the resulting prints being sent like kidnap notes to the distressed father. He eventually recovers the gnome, and is inspired by the trauma to depart on peregrinations of his own. The miniaturisation and mass reproduction as replicas or on postcards of iconic architectural sites is often taken as the classic instance of kitsch value. When the Sphinx or the Statue of Liberty are juxtaposed in *Amélie* with that purest exemplar of kitsch imaginable

– the garden gnome – Polaroid’s paradoxical fate has been most economically summed up. Thus the trick of the film is to distract us from what is really being fetishised – modern digital filmmaking technologies – by the sentimental remembrance of now obsolete forms. In this way we can regard with complacent condescension the derelict technological idols that block our view of our contemporary ones.

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<sup>ii</sup> Adams and Land met in 1949, at a time when Adams did a range of commercial photographic work to subsidise what he considered his main work in fine art photography. The consultancy for Polaroid provided him with a stable and guaranteed income testing and reporting on new film and cameras and advising Polaroid on developmental strategy. That he took this role very seriously is attested to by the hundreds and hundreds of detailed memos and letters he wrote to the company. This correspondence is held at the Polaroid Collections, with carbons at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona.

<sup>iii</sup> See, for instance, his textbook *The Print: Contact Printing and Enlarging*, in which he writes, 'the print itself is somewhat of an interpretation, a performance of the photographic idea' (v). All citations from Ansel Adams are used with permission of The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

<sup>iv</sup> Thanks to Annabella Pollen for reminding me of these lyrics.

<sup>v</sup> Michael Freeman, in *Instant Film Photography* notes: 'To some extent instant film prints are susceptible to the normal causes of deterioration that affect all photographs. Light, chemicals, humidity, heat and rough handling are the main reasons for the loss of image quality over the years. All, however, can be guarded against' (84). He adds that the mylar screen of integral Polaroid prints in fact offers them additional protection not enjoyed by conventional colour prints. See also McElhone.

<sup>vi</sup> Dean, who worked as a consultant for Polaroid between 1956 and 1966, was attending a photography workshop at Yosemite, presumably run by Ansel Adams.

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<sup>vii</sup> Polaroid's introduction of professional backs for their cameras made instant film, if not Polaroid's cameras, an indispensable accessory of fashion and advertising photography: 'there are few professional studio sessions today in which the waste bin or floor is not being filled with the discarded covers of instant prints' (Freeman 6)

<sup>viii</sup> On the mutual interdependence of educational institutions, galleries, museums and Polaroid in the Greater Boston area see Lafo and Nagler.

<sup>ix</sup> There is in fact a specialist manual dedicated primarily to integral Polaroid photography, by Michael Freeman, but tellingly, it mostly advises on ways to circumvent the simplicity of the camera, especially in the manipulation of the print after it has left the camera.

<sup>x</sup> The author consulted in 2007 materials that Polaroid Corporation donated to Baker Library, Harvard Business School in 2006. The collection was largely unprocessed at the time this article was published. The Polaroid archives will henceforth be cited as the Polaroid Corporation Collection.

<sup>xi</sup> As advertised in July 1949 issue of *American Photography*.