

Polaroid: What Price Largesse?

by A. D. Coleman

In 1980, I published several versions of a critique¹ of the effects of sponsorship by Polaroid on what the corporation then called, in a remarkably proprietary locution, "Polaroid photographers."² How, if at all, an editor asks me now, do things look on that front today? What's changed, and what's remained the same?

Since most readers will not be familiar with my original commentary, the best way to answer, I think, is to look at what I wrote then and annotate it. The italicized passages that follow come from the 1980 text; the reconsideration of each follows immediately.

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The [Polaroid] corporation has long been a silent partner (and . . . a sometimes less than silent one) in the development of an extensive body of "creative" Polaroid photography. The corporation's role in this cannot merely be subsumed into the category of "medium" (as can, say, Kodak's impact on imagery as exercised through the aesthetic and perceptual options and limitations built into its products). Polaroid's influence on the work created by those who use Polaroid systems to generate "art photography" is hardly limited to the consequences of the structure of the tools and materials alone.³ Rather, it extends much further — it is

¹ See "Polaroid: Toward A Dangerous Future" in *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom, Essays and Lectures 1979-1989* (Midmarch Arts Press, 1996), pp. 62-68.

² Hard to imagine another camera or film manufacturer referring to consumers that way, especially since Kodak, for all its efforts at domination of the world market, has not — at least in our time — referred to those who use its products as "Kodak photographers."

³ Not that those consequences should be discounted. In his unauthorized history of the Polaroid Corporation, *The Instant Image: Edwin Land and the Polaroid Experience* (New York: Stein & Day, 1978), Mark Olshaker offers his own summation of the aesthetic agenda built into the Polaroid process: "By removing both technical and temporal barriers, Land feels that the picture-taker is put in a truer and more direct relationship with his subject. He need be concerned only with the 'what' of his interest, and not with the 'how' of conveying it." (P. 9) Land himself, in "One Step Photography," an essay he contributed to *The Photographic Journal* in January of 1950, presented his imagistic credo thus: By making it possible for the photographer to observe his work and his subject matter

now intertwined with the economics, production context, presentation and dissemination of the imagery itself.

This is a direct result of Polaroid's commitment to supporting creative experimentation with Polaroid equipment and film. By comparison with most other manufactures of photographic products, Polaroid's approach to this issue seems exemplary. Film has been given away in large quantities. The various SX-70 camera models have also been given outright to many artists, while more expensive equipment has been lent out for prolonged periods (or, in the case of the 20x24 camera, made available). A considerable amount of imagery has been purchased for both the Boston and the "Europa" collections. And that work has been circulated in numerous Polaroid-organized exhibitions, anthologized in at least two Polaroid-sponsored books to date, and otherwise disseminated, sometimes directly by the corporation and generally with its blessing and assistance.⁴

The almost two decades between that statement and the present moment have seen some momentous ups and downs throughout the photo industry. Some of what I said about Polaroid came to apply soon thereafter to Kodak, whose sponsorship activities in creative photography expanded considerably during the '80s: Big Yellow aggressively set out to be the dominant, preferably exclusive funder of a large selection of the ever-widening network of international photo festivals (with the Rencontres in Arles as its flagship), and simultaneously sank substantial sums of money into the backing of major books, limited-edition portfolios and traveling exhibitions by Ralph Gibson, Elisabeth Sunday, Benedict J. Fernandez and Marilyn Bridges, among others. It became a major funder of the International Center of Photography in New York City, while also subsidizing (with dependable full-page advertising) a sizeable percentage of the "little" magazines of

simultaneously, and by removing the manipulative barriers between the photographer and the photograph . . . the photographer by definition need think of the art in the taking and not in making photographs." (Cited in Olshaker, pp. 56-57.) We might extract from this some potent and hardly neutral beliefs inherent in the Polaroid systems: that the meditative relationship to materials of the photographer-as-printmaker is a "barrier"; that the emphasis in photography should be on "taking" rather than "making; that process is to be truncated, production accelerated; that the "what" of one's subject matter is more important than the "how" of one's representation

photography — the small quarterlies, regional journals and non-profit house organs in which much of the serious critical discourse about the medium takes place, and in which much relevant activity is tracked for the historical record. While Kodak still contributes to many of the festivals, and to the ICP, there's been noticeable retrenching in the other areas; in a belt-tightening phase, the company appears to have opted for backing those events that provide the highest visibility to the widest segment of the general public and the market for its products, a decision not difficult to understand.

Meanwhile, Polaroid has undergone assorted economic crises, as a result of which its give-back to the field appears to have diminished somewhat. Its long-term sponsorship of the Photographic Resource Center in Boston was drastically reduced. Cameras and film are not handed out so freely as they were from the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s. Nor is time in the several 20x24" Polaroid camera studios as readily available to photographers on a purely barter basis (in exchange for prints) as it was then. Yet one could argue that virtually any work produced by using the 20x24 is effectively company-subsidized, and at considerable expense, since these cameras and their accompanying support systems (film production, tech crews, etc.) have little commercial application, hardly constitute a major source of revenue for the corporation, and are maintained primarily for the use of fine artists and others.

I should also point out that photo-industry tithing has declined across the boards in recent years, what with the international fiscal crunch and all, and that no other manufacturers seem inclined to put nearly as much thought and effort into returning anything to the community as do Kodak and Polaroid.⁵ However, the inevitable periodic expansion and contraction of the coffers notwithstanding, the situation industry-wide appears to be that such activity is seen not as obligatory but as benevolence, largesse, to be begged for perennially and doled out whenever excess funds are available and someone within the corporate structure inclined to

⁴ Op. cit., p. 63.

⁵ Though I should mention that, in the States, Ilford produces a most useful semi-annual journal, edited by Wendy Erickson, *The Photo Instructor*, that is available at no cost to photo-educators and others in the field.

spread the wealth — a Jon Holmes or Eelco Wolf at Polaroid, a Ray de Moulin at Kodak — comes along.

Perhaps if the constituencies that provide the photo industry with its bedrock of professional support — photo teachers and administrators of photo-ed-programs, fine-art photographers, documentarians and photojournalists, editorial and commercial photographers and their various professional societies — were to band together and make demands as a united front, industry's rebate to this sector of its market might become more systematic and substantial, understood as an appropriate and necessary expense of doing business rather than as a whim.

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The benefits that accrue to the corporation [as a result of this policy], in public relations value alone, are enormous; and though I have yet to see an estimate of the financial value of the collections, their promotion by the corporation has surely not decreased their value in the marketplace. By the same token, photographers who could not otherwise afford to explore Polaroid equipment and materials have been given the opportunity to do so. They have thus been enabled to create works that they can publish, exhibit, and sell independently, and in many cases have had their results purchased and/or disseminated (through exhibition and publication) by the sponsoring institution itself.⁶

Polaroid does continue to acquire work for its collection, to lend that work out for exhibition, and occasionally to mount exhibitions and create publications drawn from the collection. Yet this is not exactly selfless generosity. The value of much of the work acquired by Polaroid has risen considerably during this time; creative work done on Polaroid materials has established itself as viable in the market for photographs as collectible art objects (this serves the interests of picture-makers as well, of course); and that's not to mention the considerable publicity value of having the company name attached to exhibited and published works in the materials descriptions thereof — a benefit that no other parallel company enjoys. (A William Wegman or Chuck Close piece will automatically be identified as a Polaroid work; images made with Leica or Nikon cameras, and prints made with Kodak or Ilford

film and paper, are rarely if ever so identified in auction catalogues, exhibition labels and image captions in books and magazines.)

One could also argue that the Polaroid transfer process represents a significant quid pro quo in and of itself, a direct benefit of the ingenuity of the creative community that Polaroid enjoys free of charge. After all, here we have a technique invented not by the manufacturer but by eccentric fine-art photographers, that has not only trickled down into usage by the advertising and graphic-arts communities (thus expanding Polaroid's market base for various of its materials), but has spawned a whole line of Polaroid products — the Polaroid transfer kits and tools. A method once promulgated mainly at alternative-photography workshops, to the head-scratching bemusement of Polaroid executives, is now demonstrated by Polaroid staffers at VisComm and other trade expos, where the necessary tools and materials sell steadily.⁷

Polaroid also still makes cameras and materials available, free or at low cost, to teachers, though this appears to happen not systematically but more or less at random. And requests by photographers for such equipment and materials are periodically granted, though here too it seems to depend on the luck of the draw.

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[G]iven what seems to me to be the revolutionary nature of Polaroid as an image-making process, the work being produced thereby under the aegis of the Polaroid Corporation is aesthetically and conceptually conservative. . . . It is perhaps inevitable that a major corporation — even one built around a revolutionary imaging system — would, consciously or not, tend to favor safe, likable, non-controversial and unthreatening “creative” applications of their products. . . . Still, without casting aspersions on anyone, we might conclude that on the evidence . . . , Polaroid’s impact on creative Polaroid photography to date is a paradigm of the

⁶ Op. cit., pp. 63-64.

⁷ I might also propose that the computer software industry has benefitted similarly. Kai's Power Goo and several other photo-manipulation programs offers options remarkably to the effects of manipulating the malleable emulsion in SX-70 prints, initially explored by Lucas Samaras, Les Krims and other art photographers. If not already available, I fully expect some imminently forthcoming version of Photoshop to include an "emulsion-transfer look" option in one of its menus.

*problems inherent in corporate sponsorship of art.*⁸

Was it not ever so? Patronage almost always comes with strings attached.⁹ Has this changed, at Polaroid or other photo corporations? Not discernibly. True, a considerable amount of provocative Polaroid imagery has emerged over that stretch of time, including 20x24 work from picture-makers as diverse as Joel-Peter Witkin and Dawoud Bey. But I consider that more the consequence of the 20x24 camera being available for hire than the result of corporate sponsorship policies shifting in favor of the socially-conscious or cutting-edge. Realistically speaking, I would no more expect Polaroid actively to seek out or endorse controversial art/photography projects than to acknowledge and advertise the widely known (and surely profitable) utility of the SX-70 in the production of visual erotica by amateurs with no training in art or photography.¹⁰

My argument in 1980 (as stated below) was that a company capable of producing a radical technological innovation should (in theory, at least, and perhaps in practice) be open to radical imagery generated therewith. But I knew that to be an optimistic rhetorical conceit, and have not been holding my breath ever since in anticipation of some dramatic loosening of corporate strictures.

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Most of the photographers represented in One of a Kind,¹¹ and many of those included in SX-70 Art,¹² seem fixated on the past — not their past, in a

⁸ Op. cit., p. 64.

⁹ A non-profit organization planning to present a public lecture of mine on matters digital contacted the Kodak Corporation in the fall of '97, inquiring about the possibility of some subsidy for the project. Kodak immediately asked for a guarantee that nothing unfavorable to the corporation or its products would be said. Though I'd planned no such comments, I immediately told my hosts that censorial sponsorship was unacceptable to me on principle, asking them to relay that information to Kodak and withdraw the request for funds; they agreed with my position, and did so.

¹⁰ Though never mentioned or even alluded to in its advertising, the Polaroid Corporation is doubtless aware that one of the main reasons for the success of its various systems has always been their enabling of the production of erotic imagery without the potentially censorious intervention of commercial processing labs.

¹¹ *One of a Kind: Recent Polaroid Photography* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publishers, 1979).

¹² *SX-70 Art*, Ralph Gibson, ed. (New York: Lustrum Press, 1979.) This book and *One of a Kind* were for many years the only surveys of Polaroid work in print. Both were sponsored by Polaroid. *One of a Kind* was the catalogue for a traveling show by the same name, drawn from the company's

specifically personal sense, but history. How else to explain their urge toward preservation, their devotion to archaism, their elaborate fussing with antique knick-knacks? How else to interpret their continual references to other, already-existing images — a practice that reaches an apogee of sorts in Victor Schrager's repetitive Sears, Roebuck catalogue-style arrangements of art reproductions?

In her introduction to One of a Kind ("A Still Life Instinct: The Color Photographer as Epicurean"), historian Eugenia Parry Janis attributes this to the medium itself, citing a "hermeticism" that she believes is virtually built into the "color chemistry" of Polaroid materials.¹³ [Belinda] Rathbone, in an article published after her departure from the Polaroid fold, notes the same phenomenon: ". . . Polaroid photographers can be generally noted for their isolation from prevailing photographic trends, with which Polaroid materials are not necessarily compatible. Instead, they have had to adopt (more or less) the conceptual position of their ancestors. . . ."14

Either (or both) of them may be right. But let us at least consider another possibility — that the Polaroid imagery being supported by the Polaroid Corporation is shaped to a great extent by that very sponsorial process. If this is true, then generalizations about "Polaroid photographers" based on such biased data are highly questionable. (Indeed, when they come from someone currently or previously involved in Polaroid's sponsorial network [like Rathbone at that time], they may be little more than self-fulfilling prophecies.)¹⁵

The question raised here is this: To what extent was the available "critical" literature on Polaroid photography of that period shaped by the same sponsorial sources affecting much of the imagery? I say this to make a point I consider obvious, but that many often miss: the texts that accompany exhibitions as wall labels, curators' statements, and catalogues — like introductions and afterwords to monographs — are compromised by the authors' financial relationship to the

U.S. collection; *SX-70 Art* was drawn from Polaroid's "Europa" collection, and was accompanied by a traveling show.

¹³ *One of a Kind*, pp. 9-20.

¹⁴ "Photography Re-invented," *Exposure*, Vol. 17, no. 4, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

project. Such writing is, in almost all cases, commissioned, bespoke, and is frequently generated by employees of the sponsorial institutions. Even when honest and authentic in its response to the work in question, it inevitably emphasizes the appreciative at the expense of the critical.

I do not intend here to castigate my colleagues — I accept some such commissions myself — but to point out that such writings (including my own) always needs to be taken with a grain of salt; whatever their purpose, they're not usually occasions for nay-saying.

It's notable that, in the four decades or so that Polaroid photography has circulated in exhibition form, no curator I know of has essayed a survey of the field independent of some involvement with the Polaroid Corporation and its collection. So far as I'm aware, therefore, even autonomous critical commentary on the medium still relies largely on a received version thereof promulgated by the Polaroid Corporation. And no publisher has brought together in anthology form — with or without Polaroid backing — the cream of four decades' worth of writing about one or another aspects of this medium and the picture-makers who employ it.

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*The artists receiving Polaroid sponsorship, in one or more of its many forms, might ask themselves similar questions from their own standpoints. Are they shaping their work — consciously or not — to please Polaroid executives and satisfy a corporate vision of what Polaroid photography should be? Are they in fact exploring the structure, the syntax, of the various Polaroid processes in order to locate what is unique to these materials and this technology, or are they letting themselves be cowed by it into a formulaic aestheticism?*¹⁶

Such questions are rarely asked of artists in interviews or at lectures and panel discussions, and even less frequently answered straightforwardly. It would be refreshing to hear any artist speak directly and frankly about these crucial issues.

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The critics and historians might ask these questions too, examining their own roles in this nexus of activity. Is it possible that evaluations of recent Polaroid work

*have been hasty, even premature? What constitutes a body of work in Polaroid? Which if any of the existing ones are exemplary, and why? In their analyses of books like One of a Kind and SX-70 Art, are they ignoring the corporate component and its shaping influence? Are they assuming that these books represent both a true cross-section of everything significant that is being done with Polaroid, and a fair representation of what can be done with it? In short, are they — are we — tailoring our understandings of Polaroid's potentials as a medium to fit the limitations that this sponsorial system has (no matter how benignly) imposed?*¹⁷

In general, aside from those occasions on which they're commissioned to provide encomia and appreciations whose function is not, strictly speaking, critical, my colleagues tend to function much more consciously in their relation to the politics of sponsorship today, and in the years since, than they did circa 1980. So I feel much less lonely whenever I draft a commentary from that standpoint today than I did when, in 1980, I seemed to be the only one biting the hand that fed so many.

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Polaroid might well look carefully at the work that has resulted from its direct patronage and ask why so little of that work suggests that Polaroid processes were essential to its production. The corporation might also ask why so much of this work is merely quaint, clever, fey, and decorative, and why so much of it is conceptually bland, socially disengaged, and emotionally neutral. Has Polaroid truly been sponsoring artists who embrace the visual challenges inherent in Dr. Land's visionary invention? Should there not be risk-taking on the sponsorial end to match the radicalism of Polaroid as an image-making tool? (After all, it was Dr. Land himself who, at Polaroid's annual stockholders' meeting in 1977, declared to an economically timid questioner that "The bottom line is in Heaven."¹⁸¹⁹

Has there been internal debate with the Polaroid Corporation over these issues? I can't say. On the one hand, the first version of these critical comments of

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 66.

¹⁷ Op. cit., pp. 67-68.

¹⁸ Olshaker, p. 6.

mine were commissioned by and published without alteration or cavil in a Polaroid house organ.²⁰ On the other, that essay (and a subsequent version of it) evoked no response whatsoever — official or unofficial, on or off the record — from anyone at the corporate end. I would not be at all surprised to learn that present or former Polaroid staff involved in these matters have spoken publicly — in lectures, at conferences, on panels — about much of this; I know a number of them as thoughtful, responsible, and forthright. However, that does not mean that, now or in the past, any considered policy to cover such activities has been articulated and put on paper.

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There is work I have seen . . . that I think points toward the future of Polaroid photography. . . . But most of what I've seen that has resulted directly from the interaction between the artist, the medium, and the Polaroid Corporation looks not forward but longingly backward, toward the past.

I've found nothing to make me change my mind on this — though there's as much or more exciting Polaroid work out there as ever. But I'm always ready to revise an opinion, and would be glad to encounter any Polaroid-endorsed project that forced me to do so.

Bibliographic citation: Coleman, A. D., "Polaroid: the Good Old Story," *Katalog* (Denmark) 10: 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 37-44.

¹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 66.

²⁰ The occasion was a review of the book *One of a Kind* that appeared in *Polaroid Close-up*, Vol.

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