Photocritic International
A. D. Coleman on Photography and Related Matters

Polaroid: Toward A Dangerous Future[1]

"It is the business of the future to be dangerous."

— Alfred North Whitehead

In her preface to *One of a Kind: Recent Polaroid Color Photography*, Belinda Rathbone offered a provocative formulation of the issues raised by this group of images. (Rathbone edited this superbly-printed coffee-table book, which is also the catalogue of a currently-traveling exhibition curated by her.) As she put it, the *One of a Kind* book and show provides "an occasion to question and explore the extent to which the medium affects the artist and the artist the medium, and what this reciprocal union might yield."[2]

Those are always important questions to ask and to ponder. But (perhaps because she was employed by Polaroid at the time) Rathbone omitted from her equation one major and essential factor. Without that factor the equation is incomplete, the resolution thereto necessarily unspecific and inaccurate, and the real lessons thereof unlearnable.

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In the summer of 1980 I had the opportunity to observe the workings of the Polaroid 20x24 camera, set up in a studio at the Arles festival (officially called the Rencontres Internationale de la Photographie) in southern France. The studio was being made available at no cost to "art photographers" who were present at the festival. In return for the photographer's choice of a print to donate to the Polaroid "Europa"

[1] Some of these ideas were first enunciated in a review of the book *One of a Kind* that was published in Polaroid's house organ, *Close-Up*, Vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1980.
[2] Boston: David R. Godine, Publishers, 1979, p. 5.

collection, each photographer who signed up was permitted several hours in which to experiment with the mammoth device, and was allowed to keep all other prints he/she produced. Use of this studio included materials, a sophisticated lighting system, and a full-time "technician" to operate the 20 x 24. The studio was booked solid for the entirety of its available time. While watching, I overheard a discussion between one of the fortunate photographers and a Polaroid representative. The photographer — who had worked with Polaroid materials before, but never with the 20 x 24, and never with any camera format that large — was unsure of what subject matter to address with this device, and was thinking out loud about the possibilities. The man from Polaroid suggested that she "bring in people off the streets — common citizens, everyday types — for formal portraits." He was willing to introduce her to some eminently picturesque local types — a colorful barfly, to mention just one . . .

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The missing factor in Rathbone's equation was the Polaroid Corporation itself. The corporation has long been a silent partner (as, as the above incident suggests, sometimes less than silent) 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 materials alone.[3] Rather, it extends much further — it is now intertwined with the economics,

[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 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 . . .

production context, presentation and dissemination of the imagery itself.

This is a direct result of Polaroid's commitment to support 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, 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 books to date, and otherwise disseminated, sometimes directly by the corporation and generally with its blessing and assistance.

I do not intend to suggest that this aggressive policy is insidious, or even wrong-headed, on Polaroid's part. The benefits that accrue to the corporation thereby, in public relations value alone, are enormous; and though I have yet to see an estimate of the financial value of the collection, 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.

To complain about this situation per se is to step into the role of dog-in-the-manger. The corporation seems to have no regrets over its role in all this, and the only *consistent* criticism I've heard from photographers is that the selection of those chosen to receive Polaroid's largesse is "political" and that Polaroid is "chintzy." Yet, short of providing unlimited access to the equipment and an endless supply of film to everyone who decides that he/she is an "art photographer," there's no way that Polaroid could avoid such accusations. Since that's patently impossible, those charges can be largely discounted.

Why, then, do I feel this lingering unease?

Its source is a critical perception: given 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.

My basis for this observation is the imagery collected in *One of a Kind* and in *SX-70 Art*.[4] The former is drawn primarily from the Boston collection, and functions explicitly as a catalogue of the exhibit as well as a printed anthology. The latter draws heavily on the Europa collection, and an exhibit that closely parallels the book is currently touring Europe. (I saw it as the Beaubourg, in Paris.) Together, these two books and their exhibition versions comprise what might be called the public face of Polaroid's direct sponsorship of creative Polaroid photography. It is from those manifestations of Polaroid's attitudes toward work in the medium it controls that the following tentative conclusions have been drawn.

Most of the photographers represented in *One of a Kind*, and many of those included in *SX-70 Art*, seem fixated on the past — not *their* past, in a specifically personal sense, but history. How else to explain their urge toward preservation, their devotion to archaicism, 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 Shrager'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.[5] 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 . . ."[6]

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

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[4] Ralph Gibson, editor. New York: Lustrum Press, 1979.
[5] *Loc. cit.*, pp. 9-20.

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, they may be little more than self-fulfilling prophecies.)

Is it coincidental that the imagery in *One of a Kind* and *SX-70 Art* is, by and large, emotionally tame, thematically and stylistically classical (with some exceptions, notably in the SX-70 work), and often academic is its reference points? Might one ask why Les Krims — who has created, published, and exhibited a large body of disturbing SX-70 fantasies that are highly controversial — is represented in both these books by only a single untypical image that is not readily identifiable as his and contains none of his characteristic emotional charge? Could that be related to the story told to me by another artist — known for his inquiry into the connections between sexuality and American culture — who was unable to complete his project with the 20 x 24 because the Polaroid technician assigned to work with him objected to the content of his imagery and refused to assist in its making? And is that in any way linked to the previously-mentioned Polaroid representative's attempt to insinuate his own aesthetic into a photographer's decision-making process?

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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. One can add the argument that, historically, the first uses of new communication technologies tend to mimic and recapitulate their predecessors: the first films aped current theatrical styles, early television was a visual version of radio, and so on.

Still, without casting aspersions on anyone, we might conclude that on the evidence provided by these books and exhibits, Polaroid's impact on creative Polaroid photography to date is a paradigm of the problems inherent in corporate sponsorship of art. Then, rather than accusations, all involved might glean from this some valuable lessons.

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

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[6] "Photography Re-invented," *Exposure*, Vol. 17, no. 4, p. 12.

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." [7])

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?

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?

The various Polaroid systems have unique qualities of their own, which seem to me to have remained largely unexplored. The immediacy of the image's appearance is certainly the primary one — and, as an aspect thereof, the emergence of the visible image within the original context of its making. This is a phenomenon which has significant consequences when the subject of the imagery is one or more human

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[7] Olshaker, p. 6.

beings. Though common to all the Polaroid processes, this phenomenon is an issue in only a few bodies of Polaroid work.

There are also aspects of the individual Polaroid processes which merit investigation. With 20 x 24, for example, scale, virtual grainlessness, shallow depth of field, and studio conditions are all givens. Few photographers have used these as springboards; the latter two have most often been taken as constraints.

With the SX-70, the rapidity of print ejection encourages a kind of gestural drawing and the creation of multiples, variations on themes, and sequences. The symmetricality of the prints, as well as their small size, lends itself to the piecing together or "quilting" of larger works. The system's effects on the dynamics of portraiture and group interaction are unprecedented. Yet none of these qualities is explored at length in either book. (The inherent miniaturizing effect of the SX-70 print, and the malleability of its emulsion, are annotated somewhat more thoroughly.)

Looked at from another vantage point, one can note themes and issues that — if one takes these books as comprehensive — have yet to be addressed. Among them are the family, human labor, social situations, the male nude, motion, multiple exposure, politics, autobiography . . .

This begins to should like a shopping list, so I will end it here. There is work I have seen — some of it represented (always too briefly to be really useful) in these two books, some not — that I think points toward the future of Polaroid photography. Nathan Farb, Doug Holleley, Robert Heinecken, Sharon Smith, Les Krims, Lucas Samaras, Kelly Wise, Chris Enos, Robert Delford Brown, John Reuter, Benno Friedman, and Rosamund Wolff Purcell are among those who have produced it. 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.

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