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## Found Polaroids (2011- on-going)

### ABSTRACT

The Found Polaroids project started in 2011 with the finding of 484 images and has grown into a personal archival collection of over six thousand Polaroids. The concept behind the project is to breathe new life into long-forgotten images by asking creative minds to write stories about them. The project simply asks for 250-350 word flash-fiction submissions; not of who these people are, but who they could have been. The project has since become a hub of collaboration between photographers, writers and academics advocating for the cultural importance of material photography and found photography. Much of this exchange and collaboration has come about through digital pathways and is part of the material turn facilitated by online exchanges.

What makes this collection unique is that most shots are entirely candid and were captured by someone who had a personal relationship with the subjects in the picture. In that sense, each comes coupled with a story that can really only be told by those in front of or behind the camera—but these stories have been lost. Initially, I was fixated on knowing the true stories, but slowly it dawned on me that the importance of stories is not always in their literal truth, but rather in the truth that is reflected in our own lives within these stories. A really great story is simply one that holds a mirror up to our own reality.

**KEYWORDS:** Polaroids, found imagery, archives, photography, vernacular photography

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### Introduction

Victor Buchli once wrote “what in conventional western terms might be thought of as waste is actually a resource to be cared for and nurtured” (Buchli et al 2010:111). This paper deals with a cache of “waste,” which I argue requires nurturing. A few years ago I came across a collection of 484 banal and aging Polaroids (Fig. 1-6). This mosaic of images stands as witness to past happenings, events to which the actual site of experience and type of experience is unknown or

unknowable. The original source of the photographs is estranged; we do not know if these images were stolen, given or purchased. I seize upon the importance of the physical photograph as a testament, a show of occurrence, of a happening, with its importance in flux at any one moment (Edwards & Hart 2010:1-15). To that end, the 484 Polaroids are conscripted to act as an exploratory tool, a guiding compass towards the importance of the family album and found-objects.



*Figure 1: Found Polaroid #108.*



*Figure 2: Found Polaroid #49.*



*Figure 3: Found Polaroid #112.*



*Figure 4: Found Polaroid #7.*



*Figure 5: Found Polaroid #127.*



Figure 6: Found Polaroid #73.

## Deconstructing the Lot

To an extent, how one views a family album or found imagery is dependent on their auto-internalization as an active viewer. Photo historian Patricia Holland argues that there is an important difference between users and readers of personal pictures. Holland asserts the position that users view photos with a wealth of knowledge, while the reader has no reference point to complete a photo's meaning and ultimately must speculate about its origin and punctum (Holland 2004:115-153). Numerous histories are etched onto the surface of these found Polaroids, waiting to be unpacked, dependent on our schools of thought and their corresponding methodological approaches. Ultimately, our ability to effectively decode these images is restricted by our inability to search out those in the images. We can deconstruct the cultural codes in each image, categorize the events, or create narratives around the studium: a woman gasping in excitement on Christmas (Fig. 6); American flags and Cuban cigars for celebratory reasons (Fig. 3); and Kodak moment smiles and deadpan stares to mimic one's current mood (Fig. 1). However, in undertaking such assessments we assign *our* value to *their* images and ultimately engage in a form of voyeurism.

Over the past decade we have witnessed an intensifying trend by academics and contemporary artists to focus on the application and creative potential of photographic archives and found imagery. This raises the question of why found images and photo-objects are rising in cultural significance. Conceivably, the material turn has inspired a return to physical objects and imagery, a retreat into the past for meaning and reflection. Contemporary examples abound of discovery through misplaced possessions. London based Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair wrote *Rodinsky's Room* largely on the premise of found objects, and in the process created a character of mythical proportions while also paying homage to a vanishing way of life. Lichtenstein and Sinclair's *Rodinsky* is one of many robust examples of how insight can be gleaned through the possessions one leaves behind. Like David Rodinsky, the recluse Henry Darger was known differently in death than in life. It was only discovered after his death that Darger, a poor janitor, was a dedicated novelist who wrote a 19,000-page work and accompanied it with hundreds of intricately drawn paintings. Those images are now displayed in galleries and in a series of artist monographs.

Vivian Maier gained critical acclaim following her death when a storage locker housing her images was auctioned off. From high profile exhibitions and artist monographs, to the rewriting of street photography books, Maier's post-mortem influence has been far reaching. Conceivably, there is something comforting in the idea of being appreciated in death, if not in life. That one's "chance to shine" is not completely tied to biological clocks and that something will survive our end. With respect to the Polaroids, we are left to imagine how these people spent the rest of their lives. Did some of them end up in jail or as bankers in black suits? The potentialities are limitless. Perhaps that limitlessness is what creates the intrigue of entering into a reciprocated gaze with someone else's images. Daniel Miller argues that objects are most powerful when they are assumed to play trivial roles in society, when their role is most open to subversion. When this occurs these objects become authoritative and effective social forces (Holland and Spence 1991:6).

For Val Williams, found photography and photo-objects disclaim authorship, and through the process of "presentation, new 'authors' are found. Historians, and archivists invest these ownerless images with their own fictions, and allow us, as audience to develop our own" (1994:24). The point that Williams is stressing is that found photography belongs to everyone and no one simultaneously (1994:27). We may be entitled to use found imagery to further our individual goals, however we are not entitled to call those images our own. In other words, an individual's use of found imagery should follow the precept that those images are borrowed, rather than owned.

When Holland and Spence write, "we make a picture, we commit our present to be recognized by an unknown future," (Holland and Spence 1991:2) they are evoking the magic that is photography, while also commenting on the reality that

images are not within our control—at least not forever. In reference to the box of 484 “ordinary” Polaroids, it is likely that the subjects in the photos and their capturers believed they controlled the trajectories of their images. It is doubtful that the producers imagined their images on a journey that severed them from their origins, only to arrive at a new location for a period of time, before moving onward, and ultimately being forgotten through loss or neglect. Seldom, if ever, do we make photographs with the intention that they become lost. And although we do not always know what or why we photograph, we tend to know know where the images will go to rest. Often we think in terms of “knowable viewership”, where the story of a photo can be known or taught by others. For the time being, the Polaroids are grouped together in archival boxes, available by request, for those who wish to gaze upon them. The archive has the ability to facilitate the telling of the past, and to help assist one in making sense of their own images, perceptions of the family album, and their relationship with photo-objects.

## Afterward

The batch of 484 Polaroids was the first installment in an evolving project. The initial concept, which was explored in the paragraphs above, became the point of departure as the focus began to grow.<sup>1</sup> After I wrote the initial sections, I continued to collect Polaroid images for their aesthetic qualities and began to focus my attention to the images that were accompanied with names, either written on the front or back of the Polaroid. This was done in the hopes of returning them to their original owners and, in the process, possibly identifying the object-paths of the images themselves. A moral endeavour, but in the end it proved largely futile. I was only able to return two images, and their object-paths remain a mystery; the subjects in the images were uncertain as to who captured the Polaroid or how it might have ended up in my possession—the circuit could not be closed. Meanwhile, I was able to make contact with two other individuals who expressed that they knew people in the images but, citing privacy reasons, declined to reveal their names. In either case this signalled a very low success rate for a *modus operandi* of searching out the individuals in the images. The concept of the project has since shifted from focusing on what the images are to what they could be—or what they could signal. In 2015, a curated selection of images was placed online.<sup>2</sup> The concept behind this turn in the project is to breathe new life into these long-forgotten images by asking creative minds to write stories about them. Individuals are encouraged to submit 250–350 word flash-fiction stories; not of whom these people are but who they could have been. The images have become inspirational canvases for writers looking for an exercise in short story writing based on visual content (see figures 7–10). The project has since become a hub for collaboration between photographers, writers and academics who advocate for the cultural importance of material photography and found photography. Much of this exchange and collaboration has come about through digital pathways and is part of the material turn facilitated by online

exchanges. Creative storytelling paired with orphaned images can be moving, and helps give life back to images that might otherwise find themselves in a waste bin.



*Figure 7: Found Polaroid #60 & story submission by Jade O'Halloran.*

She had a certain smile I was sure she reserved for me.

It was a smile that extended far past her face, and caused a thing to stir deep within me. Nobody had ever looked at me in this way; it was like I was being seen for the first time.

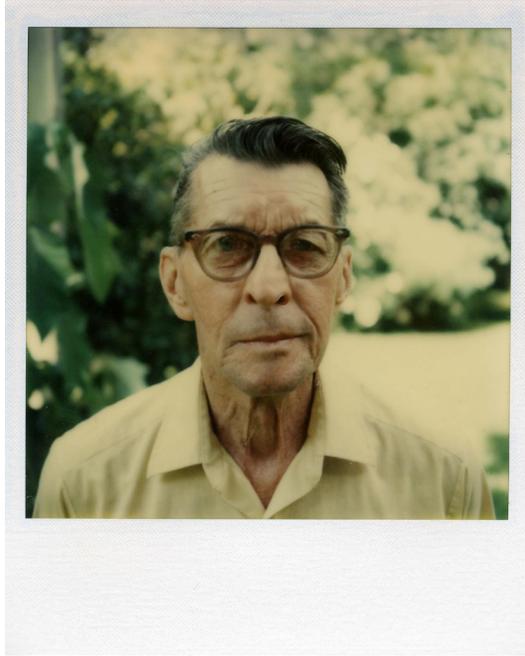
Before it started, the smiles were a shade more modest; I would pass her in the hall on the way to my apartment and we would exchange quiet glances, broken chit-chat. Even then, her brown eyes glittered knowingly. I could never hope to hide from her. I felt as though the deepest reaches of my being were wide open for her, alone, to see.

Our encounters became the thing I looked forward to. As time went on, through the succession of blundering first dates and declarations of intent and trips to the cape, the flush of prickly euphoria 'that smile' produced in me never diminished.

She liked to listen to jazz in the car during the long journeys up the coast, and she would relish picking out the smallest, innocuous details of the humdrum landmarks that we passed on the highways, describing them like she was painting a picture. I drove, she narrated.

Etta always carried sadness in her soul, but during those journeys, as we rattled along in my rusty car with its broken heater and chewed seats, it felt like we both reclaimed a certain childlike rapture, existing in our bubble, content.

It's these memories which I reserve, like Etta's smile, for moments when I need them the most; cosy rooms to hide in, to escape to, even if only fleetingly.



*Figure 8: Found Polaroid #95 & story submission by Ian Cooney.*

Old men weren't always old men. They were once boys.

And this particular boy had curly auburn hair, round rosy cheeks, and if asked would tell you with exactly three fingers just how old he was.

One summer evening, the boy was at a park with his mother, who was distracted, as she always was, by whatever book was currently in her hand. To his delight, his mother left him alone to roam around the park.

And so he did. He waddled his way around through the open grass until he came across a small pond. Surrounding the pond was a pack of mysterious orange-footed white-winged creatures. Ducks, he would later find out.

A mixture of curiosity, innocence and bravery turned the gears inside his mind, propelling him towards the strange creatures. As he got closer, he noticed miniature versions strewn among the pencil-like orange stems.

He inched his way forward and his heart beat quicker in his chest. He extended a small naive hand towards the baby ducklings and as he did, one of the large white devils let out a “QUACK” and nipped him on the top of his hand.

Shocked and through jilted tears, he cried out for his mother. From that day forward, he decided he didn't like these so called ducks very much.

And this, the old man thought, was as far back as he could remember.



*Figure 9: Found Polaroid #5 & story submission by Kat Ward.*

Sighing and staring off into the distance, Howard heard the familiar click, click whir of the Polaroid camera. Posing was so forced and he was out of practise. People didn't want to take his photo very often and he was glad, but this was a special occasion and if Heather didn't get a photo or two he'd never hear the end of it. It'd been like this for a long time, on special occasions. He couldn't see the appeal himself, it's not like there wouldn't be other birthdays but if it pleased her, he guessed he'd go along with it.

The meal was a birthday present, paid for by his daughter, Susan, but mostly her lawyer husband, Mike. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't touched. He wasn't the type to accept handouts but it would have been rude not to and when he saw Heather's eyes light up, well, that settled it.

She'd asked him to step outside, to look out at the ocean, and he'd obliged. He needed the fresh air.

It was odd, socialising with these familiar faces, acquaintances, all of a certain age. He was suddenly very aware of his own mortality, not that he needed reminding, his creaking joints were proof enough of that. Getting old was all he thought about these days.

Secretly, he resented the polite conversation. It was all a little too comfortable, all a little too safe. It was like everyone was just going through the motions. Somewhere along the line they'd forgotten to live.

Sometimes, he'd think back, to that other life, the one that had been his before getting married to Heather, the mortgage and the kids. He still thought about her sometimes but the memories had started to fade years ago, now he could barely see her face. Still, it didn't do much good to reminisce. Those choices were made a long time ago.

For now he had the view, Heather and Susan and all he had to do was smile.



*Figure 10: Found Polaroid #101 & story submission by Carson Hammond.*

Look at this Dad—this Cool Dad. This Nice Young Dad of Yesteryear.

Like, maybe thinking, Okay, yeah, time to kick the habit, now that I'm a Dad and all, right? Even though I adore it, the ritual, the sense of consuming-something-but-not-really. Burning money, burning lungs, decadent-like: pure expenditure. The whole languid 'aesthetic' of it. Not to mention the way it calms me down when I'm stressed, which ironically is more than ever now that I've got this new responsibility,

haha!—this little life I friggin’ love? So I’m cutting back. And he does, to the point where he maybe just has one at the odd social thing after a couple beers, that’s it. Swear to God. He can keep it to that, being someone who’s remarkably stable but who still understands the value of a little measured indulgence now and then, you know?

So, for example, after years of dutifully attending all those recitals and games and graduations etc., maybe bringing along one of those big bulky video cameras at some point—the kind that used to cost an arm and a friggin’ leg, as he’d probably put it—before it’s just another artifact, he catches you lighting up a Pall Mall Blue, let’s say, behind the garage. Your Cool Old Man. And you know what?

None of this ‘smoke a whole carton to learn your lesson.’ None of this weeping and gnashing of teeth. His response is tranquil, aphoristic; the worldly wisdom it conveys in that moment is ineffable. But let me tell you: you’ll always remember that time he said that thing, maybe get a tattoo of it down the line? Just a thought.

And then, I guess, you move away for school or a job or whatever, but you keep in touch. You visit now and then, less.

Your grandparents start going, maybe even an aunt or uncle or two, and he starts having to watch his cholesterol, maybe gets a little melanoma once or twice but it’s fine, relax, they removed it all. And even though he’s, you know, increasingly faced with his own mortality, decrepitude and death etc., he never minimizes your own dumb problems. He just sits there, somewhere far away, maybe in that old chair with the faded floral upholstery, maybe a bit grey with some rubbed-in ash, maybe pock-marked by an ancient cigarette burn here and there, thinking about having one but not, nodding along and smiling and listening to the sound of you.

## Notes

1. The initial sections of this paper were written in 2014, the following section titled ‘Afterward’ and the accompanying stories were added in 2016 to provide an update on the project.
2. Additional Polaroid images and submitted stories can be found at [www.foundpolaroids.com](http://www.foundpolaroids.com).

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