

**THE POLAROID YEARS:
INSTANT PHOTOGRAPHY
AND EXPERIMENTATION**

Edited by Mary-Kay Lombino

Prestel

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The Polaroid Years is both a fantastic archive of fine-art instant photography and an insightful discussion of ideas like technology and practice. Editor Mary-Kay Lombino, who as curator of photography at Vassar’s Art Center organized the show on which the book is based, sets the beginning of the “Polaroid Years” in 1972, when the SX-70 debuted in Miami. It was the first instant camera that could take pictures quickly and didn’t leave chemicals on the photographer’s hands. Using a gelatin-based emulsion that gave incredible richness and depth of color, SX-70s were quickly embraced by photographers like Walker Evans and Ansel Adams (Polaroid’s first artistic ambassador, hired in the ’50s). But the images took days to fully solidify, meaning that they could be swirled, distorted, and turned into psychedelic stipples of color, which. This annoyed the Polaroid scientists, who responded with quicker-drying emulsion.

More and more, photographers who were once pure to the form of traditional photography came to embrace Polaroids—first as a tool to proof lighting and composition, and then for the Polaroids themselves. Polaroid responded by making the cameras bigger and bigger and eventually built one the size of a Volkswagen for contact prints of museum paintings that produced 40’ by 80’ prints, used to great effect by Chuck Close and William Wegman. Because of this widespread use, the images in *The Polaroid Years* seem to catalogue nearly every previous art movement of

the past 100 years, with images mimicking impressionism, cubism, abstraction, pop, everything.

One of the few flaws of *The Polaroid Years* is that while Lombino (and Peter Buse, who contributes an excellent essay on the “perversity” of Polaroid) accurately describes the decline of Polaroid as a medium, she misses an opportunity to point out how much of the current experimental work in digital photography is directly descended from aesthetic experiments in Polaroids. From Instagram to selfies and surveillance aesthetic, there are a wealth of connections that Lombino may have felt were outside the scope of her book, but if included would have provided a more optimistic coda than ending with Carter and Dash Snow, offering rich opportunities to contrast Polaroid’s irreproducibility with digital work’s transience.

That’s a small complaint, however, for a book that is provocative and exhaustive, beautiful and rich. Throughout *The Polaroid Years*, Lombino makes a strong case for Polaroids as a medium, by highlighting both the artists primarily known for Polaroids and the groundbreaking work that could only have been done with the instant film. It’s sad that Polaroids have declined to a specialty medium, but *The Polaroid Years* is the best celebration that medium could hope for.

— JOSH STEICHMANN

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