



Gabriele Basilico



Art Kane



Danny Lyon



William Ropp



Cay Lang



Karl Baden



Helmut Newton

THERE'S A village on the road from Guilin to Yangshuo in China in which most of the inhabitants own a photographic portrait of themselves. I know because I took them.

In December 1999, I was attending a sculpture symposium in the middle of the Chinese countryside. There's only so much time you can spend watching a man chipping away at a 20-foot long marble tennis shoe, so I wandered a mile or so through the paddy fields until I reached the sort of settlement that I'd only previously seen on dinner plates. An old lady shouted at me. Two boys whisked me off to see some prehistoric cave paintings. A man handed me a turnip. The local school was given leave to run out of lessons and gawk at me. I gawked back. I wanted to take some photographs to record the experience. But didn't want to feel like a fat Western parasite. Then a man named Dr Edwin H Land (1909-1991) rescued my conscience.

I took the bus back into town and bought myself a Polaroid camera - a model that looked pretty much like the one Dr Land launched on to the American market in 1948. He wasn't the first to develop the instant camera - the earliest version went into production in New York in 1857, the work of

Messrs Bolles and Smith. But the Polaroid was the model that the world decided to adopt. A squat little box containing a cartridge of flat little packets of chemicals. A handy tool for replicating a patch of the world in less than the time it takes to boil a kettle.

On my next visit to the village, I pulled out my new camera, pressed the button, and listened to the familiar and disconcerting sound of a slice of photosensitive paper squeezing between the camera's pressure rollers. (Euh-euh-eeeeuuuh, more or less).

I handed the blank square to the 10-year-old girl I'd just snapped, and watched her face fill with surprise and pleasure as she observed an image of herself coalescing in the frame - just as I'd done at her age. Ten minutes later, people were queuing up to be photographed with babies, motorbikes and cows.

The Polaroid seems built for such situations. More than any other kind of camera, it's a kind of tool. Its associated genres are more utilitarian than aesthetic. The celeb snapshot: a bleached-out face looming by a stage door, caught above a thick white band perfect for the addition of a felt-tipped signature. The compensation shot: the broken paving stone, the maggoty meat pie, the dead mouse in the cornflake packet, documented with righteous precision. *The Readers' Wives*

shot: striated thighs and gruesome headboards, immortalised without the embarrassing intercession of a chemist. (This one, surely, is a dying art.)

In early 1956, Edwin Land recruited the photographer Ansel Adams to found a collection of Polaroid photography, to demonstrate what artists and enthusiasts could produce with the technology. It's hard to imagine a figure like Adams - best known for his expansive monochrome shots of the American wilderness - having much time for a device as expedient as the Polaroid.

But the evidence is there in the collection. Andy Warhol's self-portrait is like a death-mask for the disposable age. Chuck Close's contribution turns the artist's face into a larky Identikit image. Peter Beard's shot of a woman melting into her own scrapbook demonstrates that surrealism can be yielded from the most prosaic of technologies. Philippe Halsman's image of Tippi Hedren under attack from a feathered assailant shows how the medium can be just as dramatic as more traditional forms of photography. Euh-euh-eeeeuuuh, it seems, can be the herald of art - as well as a way of documenting your favourite cow. *

'The Polaroid Book' by Barbara Hitchcock, edited by Steve Crist, is published by Taschen, priced £19.99

“ Warhol's self-portrait is like a death-mask ”