

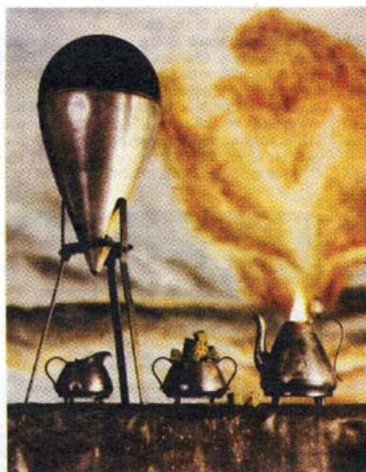
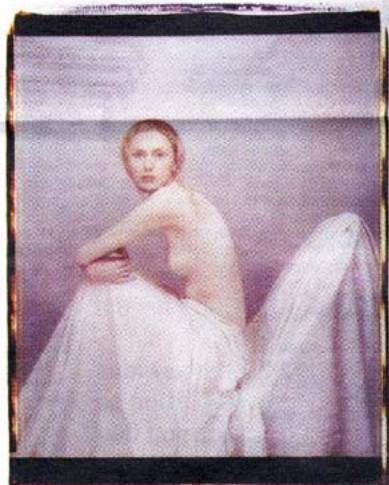
Ker-chuk psshht

Half a century before the digital revolution, Polaroid cameras were capturing and delivering the magic of the moment. Flipping through *The Polaroid Book*, **Adam Levin** rediscovers the nostalgia of the medium



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Barbara Hitchcock



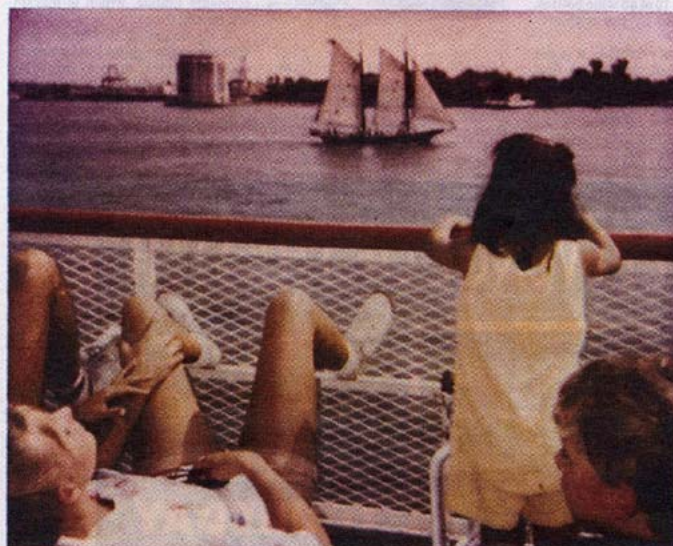
"ATOMIC TEA PARTY" © JO WHALEY 1993



CANDID CAMERA: From left to right: Andy with Camera by Olivero Toscani; Circle Line, by Barbara Hitchcock; Arles, la robe rouge, by John Batho; Related, Models Fay and Batty, by William Wegman; Suzanne in Chair, by Joyce Tennesson; Iman, by Peter Beard; Atomic Tea Party by Jo Whaley; Venta de Peces, by Jorge Saenz

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KER-CHUK! For me there is no sound more vividly evocative of teenage memories than that of someone pressing the button on a cheap, cheesy, 1980s-vintage, Polaroid camera. That clumsy sound was always instantly followed by a smooth *pssshht*, as the contraption spat out a slippery white square that reeked of chemicals and gleamed with suspense and possibility. I remember waiting, counting and tingling with anticipation, as that blank square transformed into a garishly hued explosion of frozen immediacy. *Abracadabra!* It was the best magic trick I'd ever seen.

There were many clumsy *click!* sounds in my adolescence, their consequences contained in countless, embarrassing, family photo albums. But the clicks were never quite as thrilling as the *ker-chuk-pssshhts*. They required laborious trips to the photo kiosk and days, sometimes weeks, of patience. Indeed, if it was not for Polaroid cameras, I might never have discovered the risqué allure of instant gratification.

And were it not for Edwin Land's announcement of the invention of instant photography to the American Optical Society in 1947, there might never have been a Polaroid camera. And were it not for Taschen, the ever-surprising German art-book publishers, I would probably not now be drooling over *The Polaroid Book*, a collection of 287, dreamy, *ker-chuk-pssshht* images by 224 artists, packaged cheekily in the same rectangular, vacuum foil wrapper as a pack of the original Polaroid film.

This book is an instant must-have for Polaroid fanatics, featuring as it does a catalogue of 52 classic models, from the 1954 Polaroid Highlander — the entrée into the amateur market — to the folding SX-70 Deluxe of 1975. More than that, however, this book is an exquisitely nuanced testament to the magic of the medium.

Be it the self-portrait of Andy Warhol sneezing; Peter Beard's double exposure of Iman (superimposed on a page from one of his famous scrapbooks); Robert Mapplethorpe's gritty black and white portraits; or any number of evocative snaps by people you've never heard of, each of the frozen moments, painstakingly selected from the 23 000 images in the official Polaroid Collection, con-

tains a uniquely intimate realism.

As Steve Crist observes in the book's introduction, thanks to digital technology, almost everything today is instant, but half a century ago, "the sense of seeing your pictures develop in your hand and the ability to make creative and technical adjustments while shooting was really an amazing new experience!"

The goal of Land's 30-year dialogue with the great American landscape photographer, Ansel Adams, was not only to legitimise his invention, but also to illustrate Polaroid's superb quality when displayed side-by-side with conventional prints. This book demonstrates that Polaroid images are not only equal to anything processed in a lab, but that it is a medium unto itself, unique and versatile — qualities which have as much to do with light, colour and exposure as with the fact of immediacy.

While some shots, like Helmut Newton's assemblage of erotic images and David Hockney's iconic, almost cubist, collage, have a distinctly graphic quality, others appear as painterly as oils on canvas. But it is the candid, accidental images of rear-view mirrors, blurred landscapes and video screens, the washed-out prints that have been pierced, scratched or scribbled on, that display Polaroid's authenticity in capturing intensely personal experiences. The images read like pages torn from private journals.

For me, however, Polaroid's ultimate power lies in the exchange it facilitates between photographer and subject. In the more remote parts of the world my requests for photographs have generally met with great scepticism, if not hostility. There is always the suspicion that one is somehow stealing something. At such moments, yanking a Polaroid out of the backpack makes all the difference. I'll never forget the astonishment on those faces, in the middle of nowhere, as their reflections appear magically before them. *The Polaroid Book* exonerates photography from its charge of theft, providing solid, and occasionally breathtaking, proof that a photograph can not only be taken, but given back.

● *The Polaroid Book* is published by Taschen, R384

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