

Forward: the new backward?

I was at a party recently, sketching out some of the digital vs. analogue debates around photography to my non-art buddies when someone made the casual observation that “*some company, Kodak, I think, are going to stop making film.*”

Me (disbelief): “*Yeah right...*”

That evening I went online to check this out. Sure enough, there it was, “We are acting with the knowledge that demand for traditional products is declining, especially in developed markets...”

Kodak is going to stop producing 35mm film cameras.

“The digital world is full of opportunity for Kodak, and we intend to lead it, as we have led innovation in the imaging industry for more than a decade...” This means that inevitably, demand for 35mm film will decrease (if it hasn’t already) and in the future be used only by camera buffs and artists, harder to come by, if still available at all... And so it goes, the end of an era.

Fuji for greens, Kodak for yellows. Someone once told me that printing with Fuji made everything look like Europe. That’s why I use it to make my work- for the impossible green, slightly strange to our antipodean eyes. But we were all brought up with Kodak. Whole generations have grown up looking at themselves through a patina of gold that was Kodak. Our memories captured, golden. We look back at those golden days of yesterday, gilded – perfect for this country, perfect for the light.

[Transcript of a telephone conversation.]

“*Hello, hello Justine?
It’s Bennita here, I used to work at Phocus
Photographics?*”

“*Oh Bennita! How are you!?*”

“*Well thanks. Look, I’m just ringing to let you know that I am now working at Picture Perfect, a new place in St Kilda, and that we do fine art digital AND analogue prints...*”

“*Really, you do analogue?*”

“*As big as you like...*”

“*That’s fantastic!!!! I know a swag of people who are going to be rapt to hear that... We all went to the four winds after the old place closed, but there really is no one else...*”

“*I know, it was awful. I had people crying over the phone for days when I told them we were closing, it was so emotional...*”

A reprieve! We can keep making work in the way that we have chosen to. Relief? Not really, we all know it is only a matter of time, that this is the ‘one step back’ in the ‘two steps forward one step back’ relentless climb up the ladder of progress.

A few weeks later I was running around collecting materials to finish off work for my show, when the guy behind the counter asked me, “*We’re thinking of discontinuing this line and going with Selleys double-sided stick; will that be a problem for you?*”

What to say? Only that I won’t be able to make my work any more if it doesn’t have EXACTLY the same properties as the one I have been using? That I can’t separate things from ideas? To which he might respond, “*Maybe you need to be more flexible in your practice, more open to change, more... ‘materially neutral’.*”

Me (disbelief): “*Yeah, right...*”

Just between you and me, I haven’t finished with it yet – my special brand of double-sided sticky. So many possibilities lie waiting to be explored, possibilities that arise out of the unique combinations of the materials I have been working with. I know my materials intimately. I have developed a relationship with them that has evolved over time. I have learnt their secret vocabularies and I know how to manipulate them, how to make them submit to all manner of meaning, all manner of form. Their properties I have inspected, dissected and played with... a cat teasing a mouse... then gobbled them up, starving. In my mouth they become words. I spit them out. Mostly I babble incoherent combinations, pre-linguistic mumbo jumbo, fill-in speak, “*rhubarb and pineapple and rhubarb and pineapple...*” One day I might even make whole sentences that contain within them some kind of meaning.

“...the universe of man made things simply coincides with the history of art...”

“Nothing gets made unless it is desirable”¹, observed Keubler 40 years ago, and companies have become expert in producing that which they desire, desire itself. Mass-produced desire for mass-produced goods can be a hazard not only for workers who find themselves specialists in a field of production that no longer exists. For the artist the discontinuation of a product can signal the end of a particular line of enquiry, a break in a line of flight. We are forced to change direction, to shift our practices, sometimes radically, as in the case of a friend of mine who discovered that the way in which a particular kind of paper absorbed fabric dyes was unique to it. She could find no other that had the very specific properties she required in order to get the results she was looking for. When that line of paper was discontinued, the work was no longer possible. Months of exploration rendered obsolete.



Left: Justine Khamara, detail from *Bugaboo*, installation at TCB, Melbourne, photographs and tape, 55cm x 25cm x 30cm approximately, 2004. **Right:** Justine Khamara, detail from *Bugaboo*, installation at TCB, Melbourne, photograph in aluminum frame, 19cm x 13cm, 2004. Both images courtesy the artist.

Possibilities of meaning exist in things. Things define our relationship with reality, with the world, with each other. Through things we perceive and express. For artists things speak many languages. Discontinuation of a product that we might be using in our practice can feel sometimes as though a language has been taken from us, often before we have finished what it was we were going to say, or worse, before we have fully understood it. While the production of art has always developed along with technological discoveries and innovations, the rate at which what was just newly discovered or developed becomes obsolete is unprecedented in history.

It means that, along with business, artists have to become more flexible, more nimble when it comes to materials, as what is here today is usually gone tomorrow. Some would argue that artists have had to be more flexible for some time, part of the 'post-modern condition'. Perhaps, but I would argue that until recently it was mostly a matter of choice, of positioning one's practice – something arrived at because of conceptual concerns, or personal ambition, or both, or neither of the above. Choice being the key word. What I'm banging on about are changes that are imposed from without, where whole discourses are shut down before they have even fully begun. Analogue photography, for example, has over the past decade experienced the phasing-out of specialist films, a diminishing of the variety and range of paper available because of the manoeuvrings of big business. The flip side of this, of course, is the flowering of digital media, and many artists have embraced it and are doing amazing things.

But not everyone wants to go digital; the language of digital production is very different to the language of analogue. It is not simply a case of one being better

than the other or of 'purist' ideologies, although these are also valid, it is also one of language, of relationships to time and space, of materiality, of process.

After a major paradigm shift, previous knowledge and experience become irrelevant, everyone starts again from the beginning, knowing nothing. In days gone by, after major technological breakthroughs there would be a period of adjustment, time to become familiar with new developments and the new view these arrivals offer. Today there is no opportunity for us to adjust: we live in a state of permanent adjustment. The question I find myself facing increasingly is this: how is it possible to truly develop an artistic practice in such an unstable environment? I am dogged by a sense of having always come in too late, near the end of the game, of moving my feet forward but heading backwards... fast.

Exotic Oz fem, n/s, s/d, healthy, active, friendly, GSOH, fin/insecure, educated, hang ups inc/ obsessive tendencies w/scalpel blades, otherwise harmless and ok looking – seeks meaningful connections that could use some attention. ARA. Kids ok.

Notes

1. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1968, p.1.