I would like to formally begin this talk with a quote, this quote is by Anne Kuhn She writes: "This is a story about photograph[s]; or rather, several stories of a sort that could be told about many photographs, yours as well as mine".

Victor Buchli once said, "what in conventional western terms might be thought of as waste is actually a resource to be cared for and nurtured" (2010:111). This presentation deals with a cache of 'waste', which I argue should be nurtured. A few years ago I came across a collection of 484 banal and aging Polaroids. This mosaic of images stands as testament 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.

This presentation stresses the importance of the photograph as a physical testament, a show of occurrence, of a happening, with its importance influx at any one moment (Edwards & Hart ed. 2004:4). The 484 Polaroids are conscripted to act as a tool of exploration, a guiding compass towards the importance of the family album and found-objects. I will also discuss the importance of Polaroid images as photo-objects and as photographs to be inserted into family albums.

Setting Early Parameters

To an extent, how one views a family album or found images is dependent on how they internalize their role as a viewer. Patricia Holland argues that there is an important difference between users and readers of one's personal pictures. Holland believes users who view photos bring "a wealth of surrounding knowledge" (Holland: 118), while the reader has no reference point to complete a photo's meaning and therefore must fictionalize and tease one out. Numerous lessons are

scrolled in these images, waiting to be unpacked, dependent on our schools of thought and their corresponding methodological approaches.

I myself, approached the photos with anxiety and anticipation. The anxiety came from a fear of over handling the images and further damaging them. Polaroid photos and other images as photo-objects transfer a great deal of their travels through their wear. Higher than normal signs of wear can be read as an image having importance, being carried and toted around as a prized object. While at the same time, the photograph with signs of wear can be read as having little importance, a higher level of wear attributable to its lack of totem status. Of the 484 Polaroids a good number show wear: edges of the backs have become unglued, rips in the frames have occurred, cracks in the emulsion, bends, holes from tiny nails, surface scratches, dust, gunk (and perhaps even blood?) can be viewed. There are those who would call for preservation and restoration to slow timely damage. For the Polaroid, because there is no reproducing the original, its objectness is singular, a characteristic that makes it a magical object. The Polaroid image as a 'one-off' is a unique copy; its chemical process can never be repeated.

The Importance of the Polaroid Image as Photo and as Object

When Dr. Edward Land, the founder and creative guru behind Polaroid, released his integral film in 1972, his 'flat little bags' landed him on the cover of both LIFE and TIME magazines. Christopher Bonanos, author of *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*, effectively captured Polaroid's trajectory through time when he wrote that the "gee-whiz invention of the 1940s, ubiquitous in the 1970s, ostensibly obsolete today, still exerts a weird and bewitching pull" (2010:8). Polaroid had enormous brand power; during the 1970s image-makers were shooting over a billion Polaroids a year (Ibid). Its ultimate demise, not unlike the traditional family album, is the result of a century long belief that 'all roads lead to print'.

A romanticism of sorts is imbedded in the medium—a reminder to us to think in the terms of Marshal McLuhan's *the medium is the message*. This is true of Andrei Tarkovsky's images as well the current wave of Polaroid rejuvenators purchasing the unpredictable and perhaps ever more poetic film batches resulting from The Impossible Project. The Polaroid image, like all other formats of photographic creation, "…leaves a motionless trace of what has been, a fixed imprint of something that is no longer what it was before, a silent simulacrum, of someone who has disappeared forever from our field of vision" (Chiaramonte 2004:123). What makes it unique and distinguishable from other 'silent simulacrum' creators is its originality, what can be described as its 'oneness' or 'one-off' nature. Ronald Barthes' claim that "…[w]hat the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once" does not hold true for the Polaroid (2000:4), as a Polaroid image is not reproducible.

Benjamin, in his quintessential essay *Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, justifies how readily available mechanical reproductions of art have emptied artwork of their 'aura', an attribute highly praised as being embedded in art that is of a unique and more stationary nature. The reproduction of art that dismantles aura does not apply to the Polaroid image, for the Polaroid is a unique copy and therefore retains its aura (Edwards & Hart 2004). When the film was first released its inability to produce a negative was levied as a limitation. Over time this 'limitation' became a defining characteristic of the film. The Polaroids scarcity coupled with its 'oneness', its vulnerability, gives the medium its value and authenticity. Mechanical reproduction disinvests ownership value from art and through reproduction an item losses its magnitude through possession. As art moves from spiritual to mechanical reproduction it becomes democratized, while also undergoing an erosion of aura (Benjamin 2008). The most pronounced images—those most mechanically reproduced—are those that are least rich in aura. Even the original of a scanned and electronically duplicated Polaroid still retains its aura or takes on a new form of aura

(Buse 2010), as its framing, composite chemicals and past travels cannot be digitized.

Related to Benjamin's writings on the aura is Durkheim's concept of the sacred and profane. Durkheim defines the sacred as the "representations society itself has fashioned, it includes all sorts of collective states, common traditions and emotions, feelings which have a relationship to objects of general interest" (Pickering & Redding 1975). W.S.F Pickering defines the profane to mean simply that which is not sacred and common (Ibid). Anthony Giddens removes the religious overtones from the dichotomy and defines the profane as something that is ordinary and of the everyday (1971). For Jeffry C. Alexander "Sacred forms are…cultural expressions not determined by some form of universal ontology, but socially and culturally constructed through particular historical trajectories" (Lynch 2012:42-43) & (Lynch & Sheldon 2013:254).

The sacred and the profane can also be applied to photography. Durkheim once said "sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects" (Blend 1960). It is important to remember that objects are continuously in flux; they are always being renegotiated and thus can move between being profane or sacred. Scarcity can help establish an item as sacred, but scarcity alone is not enough as scarce items can be forgotten in the cultural imaginary. No one remembers the Kodak Trimprint or Russia's Polaroid knockoff the 'Moment'. A leap of faith is required for an item to gain the title of sacred. People must invest themselves in these and collectively determine they are to be valued beyond their physical worth. I would argue that over the past decades this has occurred to Polaroid film, it has become wildly iconic and therefore scared. The discontinuation of film and the near total digitalization of photography have moved this type of image creation towards sacredness.

The importance of the photo as an object has existed since the birth of the photographic medium. Joan Schwartz describes the daguerreotype as a mirror with a memory; not just an image but also an object. Dr. Land's Polaroid continues this tradition of photo as object. Over time, in a culture that is more and more based on the material, we begin to lose the material nature of our 'photo lives'. In a sense, technological fetishism overrides commodity fetishism. Cultural changes underway (the rise of pathways for digital storing and sharing), it is important to revisit the importance of the Polaroid as a photo-object. We create more photos than ever while printing far less. This is a crisis of modern times, it is the loss of our physical relationship with photos and the cultural subtexts embedded in the practice of possessing physical images. The photo album is a site for re-thinking photo materiality and our relationship to the physical photo. A family's photo album is a trove of importance and filling it with Polaroid images perhaps increases its importance given that Polaroids are 'one-offs'. The family album is as precious as the Polaroid image and both speak to a certain time. The family album and Polaroid function as *objects* in themselves, while simultaneously acting as *photo-objects*.

A Box of Polaroids

Through extended surveying of the images, ideas prematurely thought of as self-evident were questioned. The box of Polaroid images are more or less found images; more so in the sense that they were found on eBay, less in the sense that a small monetary exchange was in order for their procurement. They are found images, in a rather unromantic sense, showing testament to changing modes of acquisition based evermore on Ethernet cables than physical pathways.

The assumption that these Polaroids belong to a single family is juvenile, differing too much in their characters, settings and development dates. Looking for common links to bond all the images to one narrative is doubtful when one becomes properly acquainted with the images. A previous owner had collected these images, placed them together and by doing so bound them to each other, in a new and

scattered narrative. Therefore this box is better equipped for understanding found objects and object journeys than for understanding a single family through their album. As Allan Sekula explains in his article '*Reading an Archive*' "what [these] images have in common is the fact that they heap together images of very different kinds and impose upon them a homogeneity that is a product of their very existence within an archive" (Holland 2004:62).

Like the Polaroid itself, these photos reveal themselves overtime. We must keep in mind there are things the family can and cannot tell the onlooker. Barthes addresses this limitation in *Camera Lucida* commenting that "In semiotic terms, the photograph is disorderly because its ubiquity renders it unclassifiable: 'photography evades us'" (2000:4). It is for this reason that I employ the use of the particular to highlight the universal. Using these Polaroids as a guide we can begin to discuss the importance of the family album and found images as a way of understanding the past and ourselves.

The Importance of the Album and Found Objects

What is culturally significant about found images and photo-objects? One answer is that they play to basic intrigue. Erik Kessels, an avid collector, has published numerous photo books based on found images, of which attest to the popularity and intrigue of found albums (Kessels 2012). People love to explore and in a world that has been 'over-explored', perhaps the past is idea for reflection. May this be the reasoning behind Rachel Lichtenstein & Iain Sinclair writing of *Rodinsky's Room*? We can look back on ones life in a different way through their objects and images. Like Rodinsky, the loner Henry Darger was known differently in death than in life. It was only discovered after his death that this poor janitor was a novelist who wrote a 19,000-page work and accompanied it with hundreds of intricately drawn images. Images now displayed in galleries and in a number of monographs. Vivian Maier, a nanny in occupation gained critical acclaim after her death for her street photography (Maier 2012 & Daily Mail Reporter 2011). Conceivably there is

something comforting in the idea of being appreciated, in death if not in life. That our 'chance to shine' is not completely tied to biological clocks and quite possibly 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 end up as bankers in black suites? The potentialities are limitless in regards to his question and that is perhaps the most magical part of looking at these images. Daniel Miller argues that ", often when objects are assumed to be trivial and not to matter that they are most powerful and effective as social forces" (Edwards & Hart 2004:6).

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). Williams later goes on to state, "found photography, it would seem, belongs to everyone, and to nobody at all" (ibid 1994:27). Everyone is entitled to found images and the journey to which those images can assist while no one is entitled to call those images theirs.

Conclusion

"When we make a picture, we commit our present to be recognized by an unknown future" (Holland & Spence 1991:2). This line highlights part of 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 these images. It is doubtful that the producers saw their images making a journey, which cannot be traced back to its origin, arriving together for this period of time, until moving on, being forgotten or burned up. Seldom do we make photographs with the intention that they become lost amongst the world. We photograph with purpose, although we do not always know what or

why we photograph, we tend to know where the images will go to rest, and we think in terms of knowable viewership's, where the story of a photo can be known or taught by those who know. For now the Polaroids straddle one another on a Polaroid Wall, open and viewable to those who wish to enter a mutual gaze with them. Hopefully those who gaze upon the wall will recognize this area as a site to facilitate the telling of past, assisting one to make sense of their own photos, perceptions of the family album and their relationship with found-objects.

Afterward

This batch of 484 Polaroids was the first instalment in an evolving project. The initial concept has been briefly explored during this talk, and from that point of departure, the focus has grown. After I wrote the original paper, I continued to collect Polaroid images for their aesthetic nature. I began to focus on the images that were accompanied with names in the hopes of returning some to their original owners. I believed this was a noble endeavour, but in the end it proved largely futile. I was only able to return one image, signalling a very low success rate. The concept has since moved away from focusing on what the images are to what they could be interpreted. The images can become inspirational canvases for writers looking for an exercise in short story writing based on visual content. Quality writing paired with these lovely images can be moving, and can help give life back to images that might otherwise find themselves in a waste bin.