

SHELF LIFE

by LUCY McKEON

IN 2005, WHEN ROBERT BURLEY learned of Eastman Kodak's decision to close its Canadian branch in response to the diminishing demand for celluloid film, he heard the dying breaths not only of a brand, but also of an industry and a medium. His immediate impulse was to document the manufacturing facilities of Kodak and other companies before they were sold or reduced to rubble. He photographed locations personally meaningful to him, as an artist who knew little about the actual dark industry—dark both literally, in its production of light-sensitive materials, and figuratively, as a once-profitable industry built on closely guarded patents and secrecy. The project stretched over six years and turned into an international tour, with stops at Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York; the Ilford Company, the black-and-white film manufacturer based in Britain; Chalon-sur-Saône, France, the birthplace of photography; Polaroid's Massachusetts factory; and Dwayne's Photo in Parsons, Kansas, the last lab to develop a roll of Kodachrome.

The Disappearance of Darkness: Photography at the End of the Analog Era (Princeton Architectural Press; \$50) is a selection of Burley's photographs, accompanied by his textual commentary and introductory essays written by three curators based in some of the locations Burley visited. Though he writes that his project may be part eulogy, *Disappearance* is more autopsy than obituary. The photographs are cold and industrial in their subject matter and aesthetic. Grays, blacks, whites and greens dominate the record of factory exteriors. The starkness of cement and metal is emphasized by the space between the photographer and his recurring subject, the distances filled by dull gray parking lots, cracked and vacant. A few shots show former Kodak employees and bystanders at building demolitions, taking pictures themselves (Burley is quick to point out that his was one of the few cameras loaded with film). The truly

mournful photographs, more moving than the empty offices, abandoned warehouses, or chemicals and wires in disarray, are those that emphasize the apparitional absence of workers: the employee identification board of a Polaroid plant in the Netherlands; a lone sweater by the empty cubicles at Kodak Canada in Toronto.

Disappearance is an impressionistic investigation of the film industry—the local economies it once sustained, the many thousands of people it employed (including generations of family members), the process by which its increasingly scarce products are manufactured.



Photo booth, Métro station, Montreal, Quebec

Yet some of the contributors to *Disappearance* remain sanguine about the technological changes that are making celluloid film a rarity. In an accompanying essay, Andrea Kunard, curator at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, explains that the introduction of the handheld camera in the late nineteenth century disrupted what had been a relatively stable photography industry based around the commercial studio. The new technology democratized the form, drawing new lines between amateur and professional, art and commerce. *Plus ça change...*

THE CULTURAL TRANSITION FROM analog to digital—from the material world to a virtual one—echoes what Kunard calls the “duality of presence and absence that informs much of photography.” In this sense, digital photography is an intensification of the paradox that has marked photography

all along. But the transition to comprehending an image as intangible information is not the only effect of photography's departure from the material world.

“The darkroom is the beginning of everything,” says Platon, known for his portraits of world-renowned figures, in an interview featured in Harvey Wang's forthcoming documentary film *From Darkroom to Daylight*, which explores the decline of chemical film developing in the digital age. “You're locked away. It sort of isolates you from the world around you in a way that the computer screen does not. And it forces you to commit 100 percent to what you're doing.” Says George Tice: “I'm not just making an image—I'm making an art object, finely crafted.”

The darkroom once was the schoolroom of a craft. Describing the hours spent there, developing and redeveloping film, greats like Richard Sandler and Jerome Liebling speak fondly in Wang's film of the process itself: the discipline required to make physical adjustments against the timer, the uniqueness of each individual print, the particular texture of the surrounding darkness.

Commenting on his visit to the Ilford Company, Burley hypothesizes that film's only chance of survival will likely depend on it existing “in its simplest and original form, black-and-white,” and “solely as an artist's material.” We “march backwards into the future,” Marshall McLuhan wrote; we “cope with change,” writes Burley, “through a backward gaze.” Just as the handheld camera democratized photography, creating a distinction between professional and amateur, the digital revolution may be recategorizing film photography as a specialist's craft.

But while film may be dead (or nearly so), its affect is not. Digital cameras, which often mimic the shutter sounds of their analog predecessors, also satisfy a craving for the particular lighting, color and framing of photography's past. The Hipstamatic and Instagram filters on smartphones can produce Kodachrome's striking ceruleans and Polaroid's chunky white borders. Specialty film companies like Lomography sell their own brands of filtered film stock, as well as those of old standbys like Kodak, and also offer developing services. But these technologies of nostalgia furnish only the ready-made effect of taking a picture on celluloid film, not the experience or the meaning. They can't take us into the darkness and then expose us in time to a flash of brilliant light. ■