

AN IPHONE, AN APP AND AN IMPOSSIBLE PROJECT

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Polaroid is a trademark, like Coca-Cola. The success of a product of this kind is based on a sense of mystery: the object must be magical, it must surprise us, never completely reveal its secret.¹

Hervé Guibert



I have been lured into a world of mimicry, investigating every app and device that purports to deliver an analogue outcome. Watching chemistry and code intermingle to deliver a somewhat unpredictable print, I fetishise the device that I traveled half way around the world to procure and listen for the click written in code.

In *The Long Walk*, a short film made in 1970, Edwin Land predicts our future, suggesting that “a camera that would be, oh like the telephone, something that you use all day long, whenever an occasion arises in which you want to make sure, that you cannot trust your memory. A camera that you used as often as your pencil or your eye glasses.”²

Photography has a way of slowing down life and its subsequent decay. It enables the viewer to contemplate a lost moment in time. It allows us to be present in a past time. It bears witness. Each cut, each click, signals a moment captured, inscribed onto acetate or written in code.

According to Geoffrey Batchen, "Photography has never been any one technology; its nearly two centuries of development have been marked by numerous, competing instances of technological innovation and obsolescence, without any threat posed to the survival of the medium itself."³

Edwin Land invented the system of 'in-camera' development and presented it to the world in 1947. In two minutes or less a photograph could be taken, processed and viewed. The Polaroid camera had it all. It was modern, revolutionary and fun. It provided instant gratification, chemistry and magic melding together to create a highly desirable device. Nearly 60 years later, I find myself walking in the rain after traveling half way around the world to procure its modern equivalent. I have coveted it from afar, researched its development and watched it sell out online. In the window of a hidden, unmarked store was the only remaining device in Tokyo.

Housed in a black, buffed, cardboard box is my instant lab. Like a luxury car, it comes with various accoutrements and beautifully produced handling and maintenance manuals. Embossed on the lid is the word 'impossible.' The founders of The Impossible Project, now simply referred to as Impossible, believe that "analog things have major value in a digital world."⁴



In 2012, The Impossible Project developers proposed a concept that was revolutionary. They had dreamed of a device that could turn iPhone images into instant photographs. Code into chemical. While devotees of instant film were skeptical about the apparatus, they believed in the idea and the possibility. A total of 2,509 backers pledged US\$559,232 to kick-start the project.⁵ "The Impossible Instant Lab is designed to transform any digital image via your iPhone into an instant photo that is exposed using only the light from the display, then processed and developed by chemicals. A photo that exists physically – IRL. A photo that is a one-of-a-kind original that can be shared, exhibited and preserved. A photo that no longer needs an electronic device to be seen."⁶ It has been suggested that Steve Jobs modeled Apple on Polaroid (the company). "Both fetishised superior, elegant, covetable product design."⁷

In 2008 The Impossible Project saved the last Polaroid Film production plant from destruction and reengineered the film to eliminate its known carcinogenic properties. Although instant film, and Polaroid in particular, has always been somewhat unpredictable, its surface coating is unlike any other photographic substrate. We shoot it, aware of its defects and peculiarities, both cursing and celebrating its deformities.

Photography is magical and the instant image never fails to amaze. Sixty years after Polaroid's debut, people are still drawn in by the device and its ability to capture a moment in time and offer it up for inspection moments after its occurrence.

And herein lies the kicker: Some IP film takes up to 45 minutes to develop and has to be shielded from the light during development. It also expires very quickly and if your film is past its 'best by' date, you are left with a ghostly image that never fully develops. It is also extremely sensitive to temperature, leaving photographers filling their pockets with exposed film and shooting into cardboard boxes. The newly released IP film is supposedly less light-sensitive – but why risk it at \$4 a shot? I continue to have the same problems with shooting in a cold climate as I did before, and on a couple of occasions I have been sold expired film by IP distributors. But I continue to buy it, hoping that one day it will be less unpredictable.

Relieved of its box and silken covering, the Instant Lab cradles your iPhone on a tray balanced precariously on a series of pullouts that resemble the bellows of a large-format camera; its mechanics mimic a nineteenth-century camera more than a twenty-first.

But I am enamoured with the Instant lab, my Polaroidiana heightening with every whir and click it murmurs. I dutifully release film stock from the fridge and carefully shade the Instant Labs offerings, each chemical image cherished as if its digital counterpart has ceased to exist. Historically, instant film lent itself to certain art practices – “No negative, no trace, no proof”⁸ – and it has successfully sidestepped its demise by continuing to endear itself to a new generation who, while they do not remember the Woody Allen–Mia Farrow incident,⁹ recall André (Ice Cold) 3000’s instructions to “be on your baddest behavior” and “shake, shake it like a Polaroid picture.”¹⁰ Although the instant photograph might appear to some as no more than a plaything, it has a surface which is unmatched by any other photographic substrate and – beyond the sorcery of watching a past moment being delivered almost simultaneously as it dissolves – the film itself is unique. It has a pearlescent and a weird sheen. The moment captured dwells between the plastic back and front, twisting and turning till it escapes.

In his book *Ghost Image*, Hervé Guibert retells a story about aging André Kertész and how in his twilight years, confined to his New York apartment, losing light and devoid of time to wait for film to be developed and “out of fear that death might snatch the image away,”¹¹ he takes Polaroids.



Even though instant film is unruly, unpredictable and unstable, enthusiasts were devoted in their ‘Pola love,’ and when the final batches passed their use-by date in 2009 proponents were more than upset. John Waters declared, “The world is a terrible place without Polaroid.”¹² I, like many, hoarded film. I still have one box of 8 × 10 that I have to use, but cannot bring myself to do so.



Of all the digital pretenders, The Hipstamatic 'instant' film has come the closest to recreating the anomalies of the positive/negative image contained within that neat white border. The Hipstamatic iPhone application¹³ was based on the 1980s 'Hipstamatic 100' camera, which was developed by Bruce and Winston Dorbowsk. This application, that mimics vintage films and lenses, has successfully enticed some proponents of chemical photography into the realm of appography. It references technically obsolete analogue photography and marks a trend in lomography that reflects the groundswell in popularity of analogue and chemical photography amongst a particular demographic. The app was developed by two 29-year-old design graduates who have recently augmented their tech stable by releasing an online magazine that is analogue in feel but is "infused with technology."¹⁴ While only available online, the magazine is a "reaction to the anti-social network."¹⁵

Hipstamatic cleverly negotiates the boundary between application and entertainment and becomes a photographic device engaged within a contemporary photographic discourse. One of the main – and perhaps most important – differences that the Hipstamatic app has from other camera-phone applications is that the user has to decide which lens and/or film to use before the picture is taken. I believe that it is this difference that has created a loyal following of 'art' photographers who regularly collaborate in the development of new software for the Synthetic Corporation. In 2010, the *New York Times* enthused: "Scores of photography titles are in the App Store. Many are terrific, but not one matches Hipstamatic's blend of simplicity, serendipity and art. At heart, the app is a filter that will unpredictably saturate, blur or discolor your images, among other things."¹⁶

As an avid user of this application I know what each lens and film I have purchased will do. I have combinations saved and can deploy them as I would an analogue lens or film stock. The Hipstamatic application enables users to feel in control and enables the handler to flex. It talks to a particular aesthetic and its simulation capabilities, including aural and visual codes referencing the analogue world, reassure the darkroom alchemist that not all we see is predetermined by code. There is no command Z.¹⁷

Photography breeds a certain kind of loyalty and generally you choose a team, Canon or Nikon, Polaroid or Fuji – and for some people, it is either analogue or digital. I find it hard to choose a team. Once a purely analogue

practitioner; I have been lured by the portability and performance of my camera phone and by certain applications that mimic film types and lenses. My stable of large format cameras and darkroom alchemy will never be replaced by an application, but my head has been turned by a device that turns code into chemistry.

My Instant Lab has fulfilled its promise and while the IP film continues to have its issues I continue to buy it, hoping for that day when the film will be as good as its caustic forerunner. But until then, I can simulate and recreate digital equivalents and analogue cousins. I can live with the film's twitchiness because, without it, my beautiful 50-year-old SX 70 would just be a paperweight. I can live with the jpeg outcome from my camera phone. I have become less fire and brimstone. Maybe it is the darkroom haze or maybe, just maybe, I have got over the ghettoisation of digital photography and the purported digital deluge. Maybe.

Darkroom alchemist and appographer, collector and purveyor of snippets of light, **Rachel Allan** was awarded a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction in 2013 from the Dunedin School of Art, where she now lectures in photography. Her work scratches at the surface of reality and investigates the notion of loss and the fetishisation of objects. Rachel exhibits locally and internationally in public museums, project galleries and artist-run spaces.

- 1 Hervé Guibert, *Ghost Image* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 107.
- 2 Christopher Bonanos, Instant: A Cultural History of Polaroid, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAlwd3lxxjQ>.
- 3 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), 213.
- 4 <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/impossible/impossible-instant-lab-turn-iphone-images-into-rea/description>.
- 5 <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/impossible/impossible-instant-lab-turn-iphone-images-into-rea/posts/1133870>
- 6 <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/impossible/impossible-instant-lab-turn-iphone-images-into-rea/description>.
- 7 Christopher Bonanos, *Instant: The Story of Polaroid* (New York and Princeton: Architectural Press, 2012).
- 8 Guibert, *Ghost Image*, 109.
- 9 Maureen Orth, "Mia's Story," *Vanity Fair*, November 1992, <http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/1992/11/farrow199211>.
- 10 "Hey Ya!" by Outkast, Arista Records, Inc, 2013.
- 11 Guibert, *Ghost Image*, 110.
- 12 Bonanos, *Instant: The Story Of Polaroid*.
- 13 *Hipstamatic – Classic*, <http://hipstamatic.com/classic/>.
- 14 "Hipstamatic founders Lucas Buick, Ryan Dorshorst," *SFGATE*, 13 May 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/style/article/Hipstamatic-founders-Lucas-Buick-Ryan-Dorshorst-3550129.php>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 "Top 10 Must Have Apps for the iPhone, and Some Runners-Up," *New York Times*, 10 November 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/11/technology/personaltech/11smart.html?r=2>.
- 17 Hipstamatic released a software update in September 2015 that offers a 'Pro Camera' mode. The update provides the handler with more control, offering iso and focus control as well as after shot editing effects.