



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DARKNESS

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The past went that-a-way...We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.

Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media* 1964

THIS BOOK IS MY OWN MARCH BACKWARDS INTO THE FUTURE. IT TELLS THE STORY OF AN INDUSTRY that was obliterated by the creative destruction of the digital age. This industry not only shaped my work as an artist, but also touched millions of lives with its magical products, helping define what the twentieth century would look like and how it will be remembered. The work presented here is a photographic survey created in a post-photographic age: the result is a book about what photography once was—as a technology, an enterprise, and an art form. It is a record of the dizzying moment in photography’s history in which technological changes redefined the medium forever. It is also an account of my own transition from industrial to information age; one that demanded I play the dual role of participant and observer.

Over the last decade, the medium of photography, my life’s work, has been utterly transformed, radically and irrevocably. Think of the megaphone and the telephone, the horse-drawn carriage and the car: new technologies replacing old ones and in the process changing not only the way we are conveyed to our destination (a place, a feeling, a vision) but the destination itself. It is now clear that the dark, chemical, and physical photography that I knew in the first part of my life, will not survive into the next. My own experience with making photographs, one that involved not only seeing, but also touching, smelling, and navigating my way around dark rooms with trays of chemical baths and “safe” lights is all but gone. It has been replaced by universal electronic tools, which allow me (some would say force me) to manipulate dematerialized data on a glowing screen.

As Marshall McLuhan suggested, we cope with change through a backwards gaze; our perception of the future may lack definition, but if we’re lucky, we may momentarily glimpse a remarkably clear view of the evocative past just before it fades into history. When McLuhan published *Understanding Media*, I was a grade-school student in small-town Ontario where I lived through the 1960s, a decade of enormous technological and social change itself. At the time I had little regard for the past and a great hunger for

the limitless future. Now in my mid-fifties, and once again in a period of massive change, when by rights I should be mesmerized by the wonders to come, I find myself drawn irresistibly backward, to my past and the larger past that nourished it. When I began the project, I couldn't decide which was more poignant: the emergence of a new technology that irrevocably changed my medium or the abrupt and traumatic breakdown of a century-old industry that embodied photography's material culture. Both happened rapidly and triggered a string of conflicting emotions, including anxiety and nostalgia, bewilderment and awe, astonishment and melancholy.

All photography is about loss. Any act of taking a picture is underscored by a desire to record something on the verge of change or disappearance. We use the camera to stall (or at least slow down) time, making images of the present for recall in the future, either because we don't trust our memories to absorb or our minds to grasp what a moment was. Since photography's invention in 1839, this indexical relationship to time and reality has been the medium's currency. It has allowed us to look at the past through eyes that could only dream of what might lay beyond the moment a photograph was made.

As recently as ten years ago, I could not have dreamt that Kodak Heights, Kodak Canada's manufacturing complex in Toronto, the city where I now live, would be shut down for good in 2006. It was the tip of the iceberg. Six years on, I realize how little I knew then about the disappearing world that has preoccupied me since that time: the photographic industry. All photography was once about darkness, both literal and figurative—no other medium was predicated on it; darkness made photography unique. In the literal sense, both the production and processing of light-sensitive materials, photographic films and papers, required darkness. Figuratively, the companies manufacturing these materials have always operated in the dark, guarding a secret world of patents and high profits from those who might want to steal those alchemical formulas and methods.

While there have been only a handful of companies that manufactured photographic films and papers over the last century, their sheer size and reach would have made any kind of comprehensive history of the industry unworkable. Instead, what I set out to do was chronicle my own relationship to this world. The companies and sites I chose to photograph were all a part of my own history. My connection to the places and events in this book is a personal one, as an artist whose work depended on the materials manufactured in these mammoth and windowless buildings.

My investigation began in 2005, the year I learned that Kodak Canada's parent company, U.S.-based Eastman Kodak, had decided to close down the Canadian operation in response to a steadily shrinking demand for its traditional photographic products. Intellectually, this should have come as no surprise; it was clear by this time that as the use of digital cameras increased, there was a corresponding effect on film: many amateurs and professionals alike no longer bought photographic film. The shift to digital appeared inevitable. What could the industry do but downsize?

But I was a photographer and, after all, this was Kodak. It was unthinkable that the iconic name that had become synonymous with photography itself could disappear. I immediately applied for, and was

granted access to take pictures of the plant in Toronto before it closed. In my first days of photographing at Kodak Canada, I spoke to workers—from chemical engineers to administrative assistants—who were in shock and disbelief. The company had been a lifetime employer, and the announcement of the plant closing had shaken them to the core. It felt like speaking with someone who was trying to absorb the unexpected death of a close family member.

To create my photographs of the plant, I decided to use film, the material that had for decades been manufactured inside these very buildings. My motives were not fuelled by sentimentality; at that time, film was still the medium of choice, the one I knew would deliver the best results. In making these pictures, I caught the first glimpse of what now, with hindsight, seems impossible to have missed: the degree to which the industry supporting analog photography was threatened by a perfect storm of social, economic, and technological change.

The key to that storm, and to the vulnerability of Kodak and companies like it, was the economy of scale. When the company's founder George Eastman introduced his Kodak camera in 1888 with the slogan, "You press the button, we do the rest," he knew that if his invention were to succeed, it would need to be adopted worldwide. By simplifying and reducing the cost of what had been a complex, expensive, and cumbersome process, Eastman believed he could convince a global clientele to take up photography and buy his products. He succeeded magnificently; by the 1920s, photography had become a ubiquitous multi-faceted tool used to commemorate family occasions and exotic places, to record wars and scientific marvels, to create image inventories of the everyday world, and to provide a medium for artistic expression. For the next eighty years, Kodak's supremacy was unchallenged. But then the century turned; at the dawn of the new millennium, algorithms began to replace chemistry in photographic production, and Eastman's roll film became not only anachronistic but also unsustainable without its enormous customer base.

I now know that when I began photographing at Kodak Canada in 2005, I was documenting not just the decline of film but its disappearance. After spending eighteen months shooting the evacuation, decommissioning, and demolition of the plant—the architecture of this darkness—I turned my attention to similar companies and events. In 2007, I witnessed and recorded a series of scheduled implosions of film factories by the Kodak Company: first in Rochester, New York, the company's birthplace (1888); and then in Chalon-sur-Saône, France, the birthplace, in 1827, of photography itself.

Each time I attended one of these implosions, I knew I was watching history. The moments were both sad and sublime—and ironic. At each implosion I found myself photographing not just the unreal spectacle of enormous structures reduced to dust in a matter of seconds, but also the spectators—many of them former Kodak employees—who were invariably recording the events with digital devices, with technology that used memory cards instead of film. In almost all instances, I was the only photographer documenting these poignant occasions on film.

After concentrating on Kodak, the world's largest manufacturer of photographic products, I began to include the other companies whose materials I had also used. In 2007, I gained access to the central

facility of Agfa-Gevaert, a company founded in 1867 and located just outside Antwerp in Belgium. (By this time Agfa Photo, famous for its rich black and white films and papers, had declared bankruptcy and shut down its factory in Leverkusen, Germany; in Belgium, the parent company maintained production only of its specialized medical and aerial films.) Two years later, in 2009, I photographed what remained of Polaroid's Massachusetts factory, which had been sold and gutted after the company ceased all production of its instant films one year earlier. In 2010, I visited an Ilford plant situated in the English countryside just outside of Manchester. Founded in 1879, the U.K.-based Ilford had been forced into bankruptcy in 2004 and was subsequently restructured by a team of company executives who continued (and continue, as of this writing) to manufacture black and white photographic film and paper in the face of a rapidly declining market.

At the end of December 2010, Dwayne's Photo Lab in Parsons, Kansas, the last photographic lab in the world to process Kodachrome, accepted its last rolls of film; it was an event I wanted to document. The trip to Parsons quickly became a photographic pilgrimage that was shared by more than a hundred others who arrived from around the world to witness one of analog photography's final gasps. I was surprised not only by the number of photographers, artists, and enthusiasts who made the long drive (or took the longer flight), but also by the nature of the day. Dwayne's took on the air of a social club, not unlike other photographic labs I had used in past years. Like them, it too became a place to fraternize with other photographers dropping off or picking up film from their latest shoot. And the conviviality was heightened by the finality of the day; this was the last drop-off. Very quickly it took on the feel of an Irish wake for a longtime friend.

Pulling out my view camera and tripod, I experienced a new feeling myself. Somehow, over the course of this project and without my being fully aware of it, my photographic equipment had become outmoded and antiquated, at least to my eyes; my view camera suddenly looked like a Victorian contraption. This is difficult to explain: perhaps it is something of a double *déjà vu*. Although manufactured in the 1980s, my camera was based on a design from the late nineteenth century. In fact, it was a Victorian contraption, with a history parallel to that of film.

But now, another victim of the technological advance, it had lost its widespread usefulness; no longer was it a sophisticated or cutting-edge tool. That status on this day belonged to the digital camera that sat next to it in my equipment bag. It was this digital camera (the third acquired since starting the project) that allowed me to make still photographs, record video and sound, and identify my location through a system of satellite communication, to mention only a few of its features. Like the etching press or woodblock type, my view camera had moved into the realm of the industrial curio and artist's tool.

But something else was becoming clear to me. This digital camera wasn't just another refinement of the ancient photographic machine, a camera obscura fitted with new parts to accommodate modern times. On that warm day outside Dwayne's Lab, a global shift was taking place: the noisy and chemically realized photograph that I had handled in the dark was finally giving way to a clean, numerically-formed

picture that could only be "written" and "read" by high powered calculators, often disguised as cameras and telephones. After Dwayne's finished processing the final rolls of Kodak's oldest product, there would be one fewer reason for it to be in business. In the five and a half years that I had been working on this project, the number of film users worldwide had dropped from millions to thousands; it looked more and more unlikely that the companies that had supported film would be able to survive long into the twenty-first century. The chances that they would be able to make the transition from an analog to a digital world were slight. Just as the innocuous Google server farms built to support the collective information cloud were already replacing the white windowless film factories owned by Kodak, Dwayne's would likely soon fall prey to another business, yet to be determined.

It is the impending loss of the physical and material nature of my medium that I find most disconcerting. Traditional photographs exist in the present as objects created in the past, susceptible to the imprint of time which is manifest in their physicality. They are material objects tangibly connected to the world through the nature of their creation: impressions created with silver filaments suspended in animal gelatin, altered by light and chemistry. In the digital world, images are produced with binary code and exist as information; the material magic of photography is lost. And something else may be lost, too. Photography as an art form has always been dependent for its existence on the availability of film itself, as surely as painters have depended on the availability of canvas and tubes of paint. But the availability of film has always depended in turn on demand from mass markets that have included amateurs, professionals, government agencies, the media, and the healthcare sector, to name but a few. Each of these enormous markets has switched to digital technologies because they are faster, cheaper, and more flexible. It is ironic to think that just as film has finally been freed from its mundane applications in the everyday world to be explored only as an artist's material, it could very easily disappear altogether because these market forces no longer support the industry that makes it.

The future, however, is unknown, and anachronisms cut both ways. At this juncture in history, it is difficult not to recall the oft-repeated, though apocryphal, words of the French painter, Paul Delaroche, who upon seeing a photograph for the first time in 1839, ran into the street and declared, "From today, painting is dead." Technologies are made to be transformed, and redefined, even reinvented. If this book is a eulogy for film and the miraculous process it made possible, both now consigned to the past, it is also an article of faith that anything is possible. In this present day, having captured this dark and vanishing world in what I hope is a tender light, I continue my backward march into the future.

Burley, Robert, and The Image Centre. The Disappearance of Darkness :

Photography at the End of the Analog Era. 1st ed., Princeton Architectural Press, 2013.