

THE POLAROID YEARS *Instant Photography and Experimentation*



Neys + Bill Brandt with self portrait (although they were watching the picture being made) Penton Studios London 8th July 1952

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Picturing Life

For many artists, Polaroid cameras became the ideal tools for producing candid, über-real documents of their own lives and the lives of the people around them, often with methodical seriality, as in the collaborative work of Laura Cooper and Nick Taggart. For their ongoing project *Exterior of Unconsciousness*, Cooper and Taggart, who are married, have accumulated more than 5,000 Polaroids, which they present chronologically in blocks of thirty. Each morning since 1993, Taggart has taken one photograph of Cooper before she wakes up using his Automatic 230 Polaroid camera, selected by Taggart for its small, black-and-white instant prints. Central to the project is the ritual of Taggart capturing the stillness of his sleeping spouse in an image that appears about thirty seconds later, presumably in time for her to wake up and observe herself in another state. The quixotic notion that the prints will continue to accrue until death or divorce, according to the artists, is reflected in the sheer quantity of images amassed thus far. Rather than chronicle sameness, the pictures capture change as well as the passage of time, from different patterns of bed linens to more subtle variations, such as the angle of daylight, the steady swell of Cooper's belly during her pregnancy, and the gradual growth of her nursing baby, who appears for a year or so and then phases out. This intimate glimpse into the private lives of the artists is testament to instant photography's crucial role in the evolution and success of serial photographic projects.

Andy Warhol is not usually considered a photographer per se, but his accumulation of photographic images (he took more than 28,500 during his lifetime) and obsessive need to record the world around him were nonetheless important aspects of his artistic practice. With his photo-booth images of himself and his acquaintances, Warhol was one of the first to popularize the thrill of seeing a picture almost immediately after taking it. He later carried a Polaroid camera with him wherever he went, snapping pictures of celebrities and society personalities. He also used prints from his Polaroid Big Shot camera as the basis for his silkscreen and painted portraits, often covering his subjects in white powder and asking them to sit in a chair against a white wall in his studio, facing the windows, as he took shot after shot of them in various poses.¹² In 1979, the Polaroid Corporation invited Warhol to use the 20 x 24 camera in Cambridge, and his initial experiments with larger-than-life self-portraits reflect the massive apparatus's capacity for detail and realism. From then until 1986, the year before he died, Warhol continued to turn to Polacolor technology to re-create himself, be it in business attire or full drag.

The roughly 8,000 Polaroid snapshots Dash Snow took during his troubled yet colorful life remain one of the most significant aspects of his brief career. Collectively, the images serve as an archive of a life lived in defiance, bordering on nihilism, that Snow wore as a badge of pride. He first



Andy Warhol
Self-Portrait in Drag, 1981-82
Polaroid Polacolor print
3¼ x 2⅞ in. (9.5 x 7.3 cm)
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Laura Cooper and Nick Taggart





Exterior of the Unconsciousness, One Photograph Every Morning Before Waking, 1993–2013 (details from an ongoing series)