



Alison Rossiter, *Eastman Kodak - Kodabromide F4, expires June 1957*, processed in 2008, 6.5 x 9 cm, Courtesy of art 45, Montreal

RECORDING THE PASSAGE OF TIME

BY Mark Clintberg

I write this alone, from a cabin composed primarily of windows in Alberta's Rocky Mountains, in an artist's colony at the Banff Centre. It is winter solstice. It is 5:00 p.m. and impenetrably dark in these woods. I have seen hungry looking coyotes. When I walk to and from my studio I shake my key-

chain aimlessly, and whistle to frighten off animals — and ghosts. To my understanding, I am the sole resident using this area of the campus at this time. And so, upon noticing moonlit human footprints in the snow encircling my studio, capturing the mark of someone peering in my window — is that a greasy

Alison Rossiter and Michel Campeau evidence the expired and obsolete.

nose-print on the glass? — I cannot ignore the uncanny feeling that I'm being watched. From a completely rational perspective, these prints must be the mark of a phantom. Certainly not a friendly marmot, or the cleaning staff?

Externally priding myself on my lack of superstition, in truth I'm prone to a fear of otherworldly presences, a habit fostered and deeply imprinted by my evangelical childhood. (A particularly evocative memory involves a church youth group camping trip when blood seemed to appear on the side of our tent. Panic ensued. Evil forces were definitely present.) And so today, but a scattered series of signals, often of the circumstantial variety, is all that is required to send me into a complex calculation of proofs, signs, and escape tactics. Today I believe that this fear is born from a position of pleasure rather than suffering, since it embarks from a nostalgia for that which has vanished; in short, it is a longing for the spectral, a search for signals from forces I cannot understand.

Rays, waves, and fields are forces that pass through our bodies, and pass through objects. Near the end of the 1890s one variety of these rays became the subject of significant debate, and even fear. Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen's experiments revealed a type of radiation which he dubbed "X-rays," revealing the possibility that photographic recording could penetrate the human body. As expressed in Clément Chéroux's "Photographs of Fluids: an alphabet of invisible rays," this development captured the imaginations of the French public. A newspaper article contemporary with Röntgen's discovery explains, "the most obvious thing about this discovery was not its surgical applications or its humanitarian benefits; on the contrary it was

the curious, amusing, phantasmagorical, extraordinary aspect of the invention."¹ This observation is useful to us today in understanding the potentially mystic associations of an image like *Kodak Velox F2, Expires Sept. 1, 1941, Processed in 2008* by Alison Rossiter. The resulting image — or should we properly call it a pattern? — is a smokey and degraded whisp of tendrils. There is something similarly "extraordinary" and even "phantasmagorical" in the appearance of her image and its coming into being through the gradual exposure of an object to light in very small amounts.

Kodak Velox F2 holds the indexical history of the last sixty-odd years. As miniscule amounts of light were blocked or admitted by the movement of objects and humans and the deterioration of a container, an impression was taken by the paper. In its advancement as an object, this paper is both index and palimpsest. Our imaginations register the specters who have been in proximity to this object. But what is paradoxically evident when viewing these photographic works is their recording of complete void. They show a something and a nothing.

The surface of Rossiter's photographs — a term I use here literally, to suggest drawing with light — indicate the degraded nature of the paper. Rather than "expiring," though, this surface has simply entered into another material state, where the makeup of the paper itself becomes apparent in the process. We can see, then, that the paper is actively engaged in recording the passage of time even while not exposed by conventional standards. The chemical properties of this technology are continually in transition, suggesting that there is no properly static state for photographic paper. There are rich possibilities here for



thinking through the transition of history itself as an ever-unfixed palimpsest, for the difference between the synchronic and diachronic. Not only is the photo-object a literal recording of this passage, but its physical properties have taken on metaphorical value in the cultural understanding of photography's *purpose*.

Of course, Rossiter's project cannot be a multiple or reproduction in the sense that philosopher Walter Benjamin had in mind, since her papers are unique objects. They are photographs, but they work against Benjamin's observation that "even

the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be [...] This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence."² The rupture that Rossiter's photographs present is that they carry every mark that history has dealt them — in ways so subtle that the human eye cannot detect what the index indicates. The artist's hand is still active in arresting the final image produced, however, since she gives the signal for the object to desist in its recording process. This gesture is not so distant from the moment when a photographer releases the shutter of a single lens reflex camera. In this way, we can carry on to say that Rossiter's are photographs of evidence.

We understand, we think, the basic chemistry that produces Rossiter's images.

We remember, too, that there have been around one hundred and fifty different chemical processes used for developing since photography's invention.³ But metaphysical interpretations may be difficult for us to cast aside because of the work's strange beauty. Like Röntgen's contemporaries, and my youth group companions, we seem to want to believe that there is something

more than chemistry at work here. There is ghost blood on the tent. Why?

Nostalgia is born from the impulse to love ghosts. The writing of history in general is often the maintenance

of a love affair with a ghostly object of study. From a certain perspective, retaining proofs of spectral presences is a primary mandate of museums, and art history particularly is the process of seeking and assembling objects marked by ghosts.⁴ Wrapped up in the hunt for ghosts we find photography as a favorite weapon.

The occult quickly harnessed the capability for the photographic process to behave as a channel for investigating and revealing supernatural activity. Agents otherwise invisible, or present only for an instant, could be recorded: proof of encounters, spectral presences, and telekinetic actions.

Spectral photography attempts to regain the vanished object through capturing and reproducing it. Spirit photography, as it functioned in 19th century Europe and North America, might appear total camp to our eyes

... *“ [Rositer's] paper is actively engaged in recording the passage of time... ”*

today. A light sensitive emulsion touched by the hand of a deceased family member; a photographic plate that reveals a spirit hovering over a sitter for a portrait; a photo of ectoplasm (which bears a strong resemblance to lace or cheesecloth) imprinted with the image of a man's face, ejaculated from an orifice.⁴ We assume today that these are blatant hoaxes.

True or false, the impulse that generates these images stirs something primordial that is anchored in both pleasure and fear: the desire to understand what, if anything, lies beyond this world, and the fear that this afterlife might be something truly terrible.

Michel Campeau's suite of work *Darkroom* (2005–2006) charts the passage of ghosts. It documents the disappearance of silver-gelatin developing and photography. Digital technologies increasingly dominate the field of photography. The physical and methodological experience of making and printing photographs has changed dramatically for the vast majority of practitioners over the last decade. Now, rather than using chemical baths, tongs, and canisters of negatives, photos are printed from digital files on domestic printers or in commercial establishments. As it stands, we can safely say that Campeau's photographs are a kind of natural history of a vanishing format. Both of Campeau's and Rossiter's projects use and interpret these photographic tools to examine nostalgia, assembling evidence of a moment of acceleration.

With his photographs of darkrooms, Campeau takes on the mantle of an amateur forensic investigator, honing in on the mecha-

nisms and tools specific to silver-gelatin printing. Aesthetics of "ruin and post-industrial debris" are at the forefront of the artist's concerns with this project.⁶ These objects left behind in the wake of technological advancement more than fossils. Though outmoded, they have not ossified. These methods can still be used, and still are by some. Indeed, some would argue that the so-called digital revolution is but a small development in the history of image production.⁷ Campeau's framing of these remnants is not tender. His framing is haphazard, casual, and abrupt. Setting reinforces the strength of these impressions. Rather than isolate a discarded strip of negatives, as a researcher might in a laboratory, Campeau

“Nostalgia is born from the impulse to love ghosts.”

roves the scene quickly, as if in pursuit of a trail that will vanish. Each image presents a closeup tableau of a suddenly evacuated building, as if within an instant its inhabitants unanimously

decided their photographic method was hopelessly obsolete. Collapse of the structure is immanent. Tides are shifting. Campeau is faced with the quandary of the post-mortem photographer: how soon is too soon to skulk about the deathbed? In this case, the body is still warm.

Meanwhile, other sources suggest a yearning for lost photographic technology has reached a peak: when Polaroid announced this year that it would discontinue its eponymous instant film, due to "marketplace conditions," consumers responded bitterly.⁸ Well, some of them did. Apparently the protests were not potent enough to convince the company to



change its mind. As consumers lose interest in analogue processes that were once considered instant, those modes are extinguished and replaced, inflaming a desire for that which has passed. So why does Rossiter's and Campeau's work harness this desire?

When technologies become obsolete, artists seem to re-incorporate them into their practices, as observed by Rosalind Krauss. "It is only at its moment of fading into obsolescence," she writes, "that a technical support actually becomes available as an aesthetic medium."⁹ Now, when photographic processes are shifting, is an especially rich moment to push this observation to its very limit, with photographic theory initiated by theorists like Walter Benjamin in mind.

Paul Valéry's prediction, famously quoted by Benjamin, that in the future images will flow into our homes "[j]ust as water, gas, and electricity," with "a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign"¹⁰ has certainly come to pass. What is more startling is the way that these technologies have also caused images to flow *out* of our homes, with direct results in the social sphere. Following this step, the act of apprehending the image seems next in line to be accelerated — a photographic technology that requires no physical signal, but simply the will of its user, to record. This development will so closely resemble the action of our minds creating memories that the distinction will cease to be of interest. Networking applications will render obsolete what we understand today as observation. This capacity will be replaced with the practice of lurking, a form of visual research that actively engages with the flow of images that happen to enter the stream of information.¹¹

Now our view of photography as a process



is deeply tied to socialization and leisure pursuit, as well as a faster form of instantaneity. Even the most passing instant is seen as worthy of being recorded. This situation can no longer be considered as an “oversaturation” of images, or image “pollution,” since both of these terms exoticize a condition that has become a norm in the west, entrenched in the privileged imagination. A more productive approach accepts the increase in image creation and archiving as presenting creative impulse with greater latitude. In fact, it has taken a shift in technology to enable the potency of Campeau’s and Rossiter’s approaches. It is the contrast between two speeds of development that gives strength to Rossiter’s work. Nostalgia for a lost form is part of the pleasure involved in our reception of both of these artist’s works, but also seems a necessary precondition for their inception. Without our longing for that which has passed, Campeau’s endeavor would mean little.

While digital photography changes this experience of making images, will the results and theoretical approach of photographers change?

Early critical writing on digital photography — this is from the 1990s — was quick to say that, “digital photography is to analog photography what photography was to painting in the 1840s.”¹² Today, this sounds like wild conjecture. Do we continue to overstate the power of digital photography to sway methodology? We are quick to imagine that the living are more powerful than the dead. Only photographer’s research and experimentation will reveal the possibilities enabled by the semantics of digital photography and printing. ■

NOTES:

1. Clément Chéroux. *The Perfect Medium. Photography and the Occult*. Jean-Loup Champion, ed. New Haven; London: Yale University Press: 2004. 115.
2. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, (New York, Schocken 1969), 220
3. Jessica Gorman. “Photography at a Crossroads.” *Science News*. Vol. 162, No. 21. (November 23, 3003): 331–333. Citing Dusan Stulik, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles.
4. Note that I do not refer to the museum as a tomb, which connotes an inactive space; a spectral environment is, by contrast, full of activity.
5. These examples are drawn from Champion’s fascinating publication.
6. From the artist’s website. “Michael Campeau.” <http://campeau.agencered.ca/pages/Darkroom/index.htm> Site accessed January 1, 2009.
7. For one perspective on the development of digital technology in cinema, see John Belton’s “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution.” *October*. Vol. 100. (Spring 2002): 98–114. Although he discusses the advent of digital sound extensively, which is outside of the focus of this article, his general mode of attack could be applied to the advancement of digital photography.
8. Rob Walker. “Photo Finish.” *The New York Times*. March 16, 2008.
9. Krauss. “Anymore specificity?” *Anymore*. Cynthia C. Davidson, ed. New York: Anymore Corporation; Cambridge, London: MIT Press. (2000): 151.
10. Benjamin, 253.
11. In my experiences working with undergraduate students of art history, this practice has already gained currency. Students prefer to select objects of study using search engines to do keyword searches rather than make the same decision according to an object they physically encounter.
12. Diana Emery Hulick. “The Transcendental Machine? A comparison of Digital Photography and Nineteenth-Century Modes of Photographic Representation.” *Leonardo*. Vol. 23, No. 4. (1990): 419–425.

Mark Clintberg wrote and researched this text under the auspices of a Fleck Fellowship at the Banff Centre.