

PHOTOGRAPHY

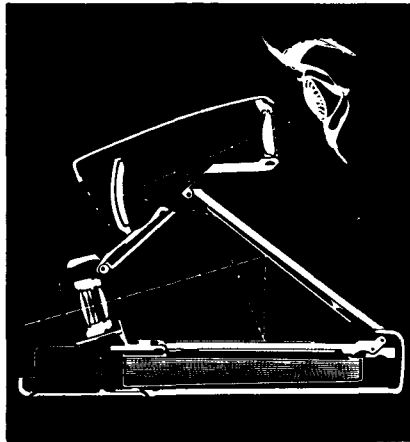
SX-70: Land's Painless Epiphany Machine

by Owen Edwards

WHEN VETERAN Polaroid watchers (a group less noteworthy than Kremlinologists perhaps, but no less dedicated) recently learned that the latest wonderthing from the Cambridge company's drawing boards is a new version of the SX-70 instant color camera that focuses by sonar, the news may not have come as too much of a surprise. Since the first instant camera was introduced by Dr. Edwin Land, in 1947, the ultimate painless epiphany machine has been a possibility. What has come as a surprise, however, is the emergence of the SX-70 as a formidable creature of art.

Perhaps no one since Henry Ford has understood the nature of American desire better than Land. His little gadgets have not destroyed one way of life and built another, as did Ford's folks' wagons, but they have created a mode of easy, quick verification—a kind of we-are-here-and-this-proves-it feedback that has made photography as domesticated and reassuringly unmysterious as a family mutt. George Eastman built Kodak on the slogan "You Push the Button, and We Do the Rest"; but Land went another step, giving the customer dominion (or the illusion of dominion) over the whole photographic process. With some justification, current SX-70 ads claim "no other camera in the world does it all."

In its essence, photography is mechanical, not sensual (no glorious brushstrokes or "freeing form from the stone"). This unromantic fact of life has been known to send talented men and women muttering out into cold rains. There are of course (and have always been) photographers who love the machinery and the processes for their own sake. The ritual of rendering images through the strict choreography of picture taking and printmaking, like the absolute structure of the haiku, can have its own inspirational impulse. Beating a form on its own terms is one of art's creative goals. But the gulf between the pure concept of the photographer's eye and the final print is vaster even than that between thought and the printed page. In fact, one measure of a photographer's skill is how well he or she can preconceive the difference between empirical visual experience and photographic record of that experience.



SX-70—Polaroid's "latest wonderthing."

Land's goal, applicable to both snapshotters and professionals, seems to be to narrow the gap between idea and picture. With a rare combination of inventive genius, idealism, business sense, and the ability to gather the best scientific talent around him, Land has pursued this goal with remarkable success. With the development of the SX-70, Polaroid has now reached the stage where visual reflex and validation (or invalidation) are almost simultaneous. Though no camera "does it all," with the SX-70 the eye can for the first time *feel* without stopping to "think"; perception is king.

It is a beautiful machine physically as well as conceptually, as elegant a bit of technology as the zeppelin or the safety pin. But we live in an age characterized by wizardly technology, with new astonishments appearing every day. However complete the SX-70's fulfillment of its inventor's ideals, there would be no reason to mention it or any particular camera in a space normally devoted to imagery and not to how that imagery is accomplished mechanically. Mediocre pictures made with a great camera are infinitely less valuable than the reverse. (It is, of course, the disingenuous business of most camera magazines to imply that if Bill Brandt can make an unforgettable picture using a certain camera at a certain setting and shutter speed, we are all just a given name brand and a couple of numbers away from immortality.)

The SX-70 deserves specific attention for another, more significant reason: Like the hand-held, fast-lens models of the late Twenties that led to the growth of modern photojournalism, Land's

painless epiphany machine is creating its own photographic genre. After years of being treated by serious photographers as a toy, or merely as a way to preview what the "real" cameras were about to take, instant photography has evolved a device capable of making pictures like no others.

Ultimately, perhaps, it is the film that has provided the lure for photographers. Each piece of SX-70 film is a self-contained sandwich of liquid metallized dyes that are activated by the ejection of the picture from the camera (with a penny arcade whirring I suspect may have been designed for more complete sensual gratification). The liquid colors tend to create a dreamy, unreal palette that when used adroitly has a range of quality from painterly to lurid, surreal, even grotesque. For up to 24 hours after a photograph is ejected, its dyes remain unstable enough to be manipulated physically by such fine arts tools as chopsticks, hairpins, and toasters. Among all the types of color film, including other Polaroid types, there is nothing remotely comparable.

Aware of the tendency of amateurs to emulate professionals, Polaroid has lavished film and cameras on such established greats as Walker Evans and Ansel Adams. And since it has always been the nature of photography to take quick and remarkable advantage of new technology, a certain number of photographers, both well known and unsung, have begun compiling an impressive collection of SX-70 imagery.

INTERESTINGLY, most art photographers have failed to understand that this camera and its film produce pictures not only in a different format (snapshot size) but in a new form altogether. Evans, for instance, ended up with small color versions of his black-and-white classics—less rich and contemplative and far less interesting. Such masters of more traditional work snapped and whirled their ways through truckloads of film and ended up with little of interest (though Polaroid dutifully shows off the ordinary with the exceptional). But a few photographers have understood the peculiarity of the mode—as diverse in its strengths as stereography—and have used it to probe vision in ways disturbing, engrossing, occasionally hallucina-



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tory, lush, lyric, and as haunting as the mystical miniatures of tantric art.

Art Kane, a commercial photographer with a reputation for innovation, and painter Lucas Samaras discovered early on that the initial instability of the liquid dyes make SX-70 pictures singularly malleable. With no darkroom, they, and others, have created warped and shimmering images that move astonishingly far from what we have come to expect of the photographic process. (Samaras, something of an entrepreneur himself, also discovered the marketing advantage of the fact that each SX-70 print is as unique as a painting. At his shows, which have consistently sold out, his prints sell for around \$600 apiece.)

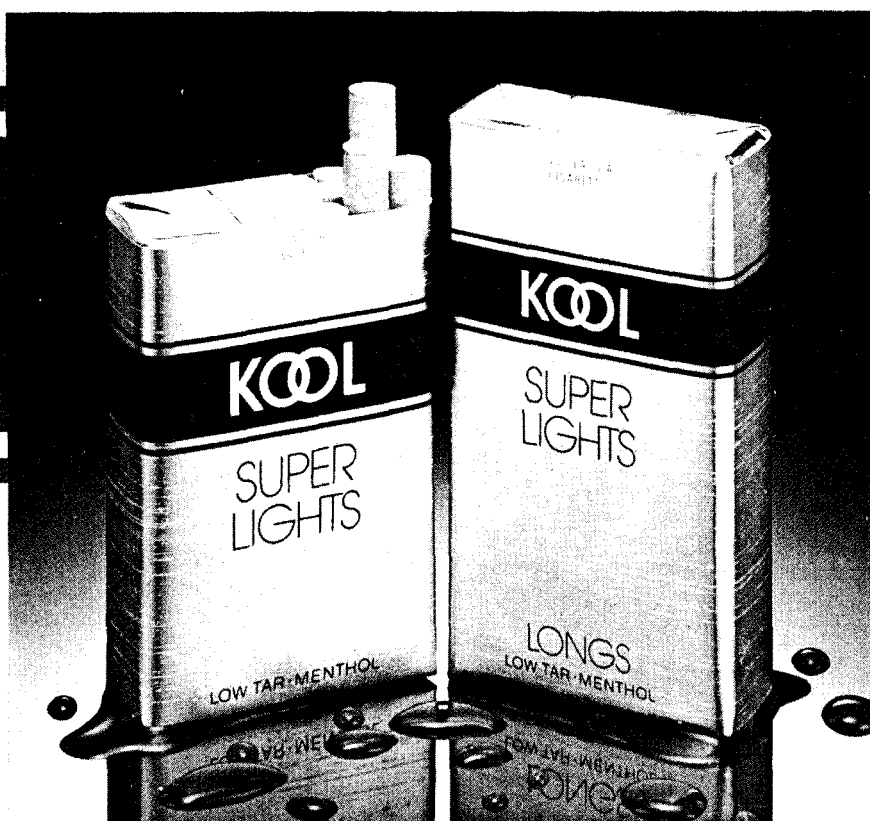
Another group of photographers, unassociated except by their common intrigue with Land's magic gadget, have been satisfied with the transmutations the camera itself is capable of. Reveling in the fact that SX-70 film is intriguing not for its accuracy but for its eccentricity, such experimenters as Frank DiPerna and Kelly Wise are emerging as the true masters of the subgenre.

DiPerna, concentrating on pictures that take advantage of what he calls "fluid, yet disciplined" colors, has produced ordinary scenes and subjects—beachscapes, chairs with flower-patterned slipcovers, nudes, interiors—that are so subtly, sensuously revised by the film that one does not quite know why the pictures are alluring, only that they are. Wise, though less consistently sensitive to the film's individuality, can transmute mundane things like chairs and vacuum cleaners into the objects of a dream landscape. Dan Roden, a Manhattan photographer who uses the SX-70 exclusively, makes garish, mildly lunatic pictures of objects (and people as objects) that contradict the impressionistic colors and end up looking like acrylic still lifes.

During the writing of this article late in an afternoon spent at the eastern tip of Long Island, I aimed my SX-70 at a freshly caught bluefish about to be broiled on a piece of aluminum foil. The light was an overhead kitchen fixture. What came out of the camera was nothing like what I had seen. It was recognizably a fish, but a fish by way of Bosch or Balthus, a creature of mystery staring malevolently, radiating a kind of nightmarish energy. The point is that I'm not a photographer; I could never have made that picture with straight equipment. I was at best an equal partner with a piece of curious machinery that has the capacity, it seems, to peel Everyman's eye. ●

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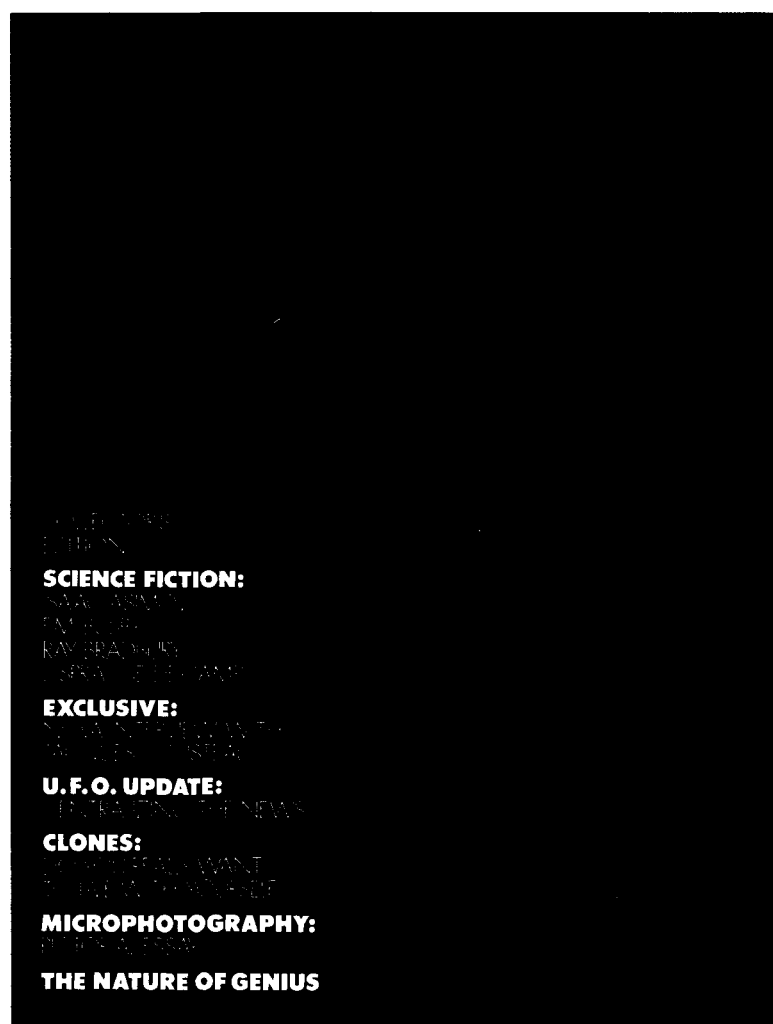
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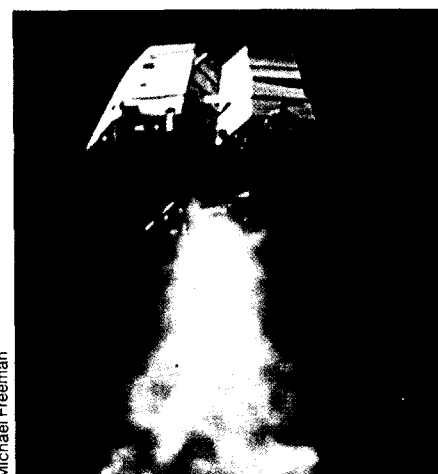
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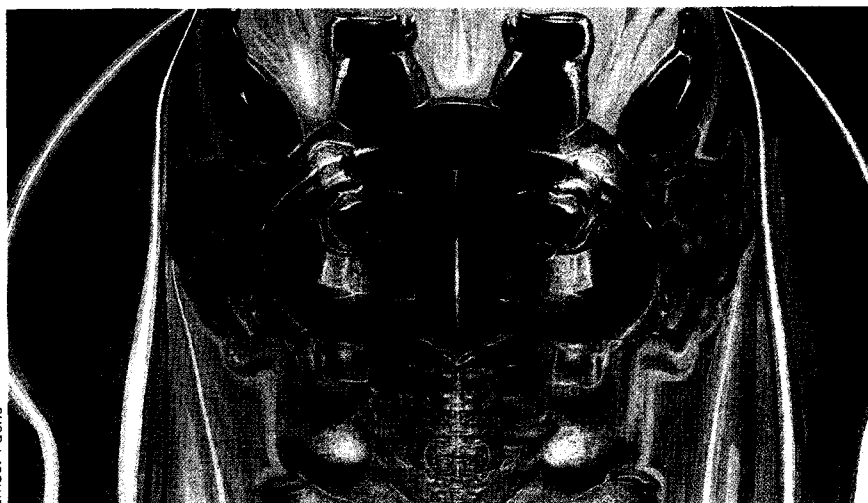
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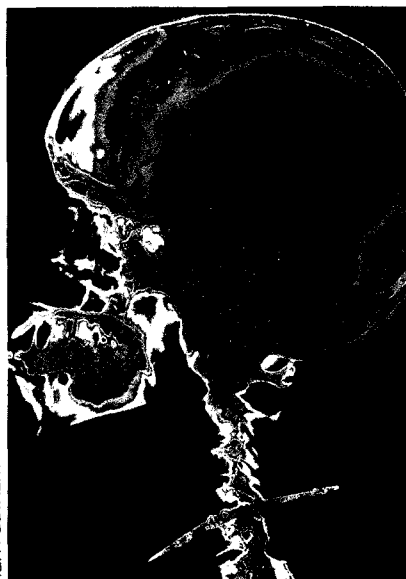
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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT JANUARY 24, it is a pleasure to report, the British public will see an introduction to the single most ambitious television project in the world. On that day, BBC 2 (British Broadcasting Corporation) will broadcast *As You Like It*, the initial installment in the televising of the complete Shakespearean canon of 37 plays. American viewers could be seeing the same production on public television soon thereafter, with five more plays due to follow during 1979: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Measure for Measure*.

But I am also compelled to report, with distinctly less pleasure, that this BBC project has already provoked what probably the silliest controversy in the history of television. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief not long ago, when I read a letter to *The New York Times* from musicians' union leader protesting in seriousness that the Shakespeare series "adds to the destruction of the American dollar as well as to the frustration and destruction of our homeown talent."

Even more astonishing is the concurrence of Joseph Papp, producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, who contends that the BBC venture will make it impossible for the commercial networks to produce any Shakespearean plays by an American company. Sounding like Polonius, Papp went on to allow that anything the British can do, we can do better.

The financial facts can be briefly set forth. A joint venture of BBC-TV and American Life Television, the Shakespeare series is budgeted at \$13.5 million, of which \$3.6 million will be contributed by American enterprises during the next six years. (For the record, the business patrons are Exxon, Metropolitan Life, and Morgan Guaranty.) To argue that this is runaway capital imperiling the dollar is to indulge in an extravagance worthy of Falstaff at his mostulous.

A further argument advanced against the BBC series is that it constitutes a form of "cultural dumping" by a country flooding our airwaves with cheaply produced British wares. No less a figure than Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has sounded this dire warning. Accusing the British of protec-

tionism, Shanker has noted that in England the BBC imposes a quota limiting the showing of non-British productions to 14 percent of air time.

There is something irresistibly comic in this reasoning to anyone who has ever lived abroad for any length of time. Turn on the telly almost anywhere in the Western world, and you will see *Kojak* and *Happy Days* and feel right at home. In point of fact, annual television exports from the United States are in the range of 150,000 hours, compared with 20,000 hours for the two next largest producer-exporters combined: Britain and France (a UNESCO study published in 1976 is the source of these figures). If other countries were to employ such an argument as Shanker's, then our own actors and producers would surely face leaner times.

All import quotas, to be sure, are questionable devices. But it should be noted that foreign programming on our commercial networks is negligible and that only 7.6 percent of public television's air time is devoted to imports.

Concerning the noneconomic aspect of the controversy, I have sought the counsel of Sam Schoenbaum, one of the wisest of Shakespearean scholars and the author of *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (most days of the week, Schoenbaum can be found behind a pile of books at the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C.). No one in America has more solid credentials in assaying four centuries of bardolatry than Schoenbaum, who is presently coeditor of a newly annotated text of the canon that Oxford University Press is preparing.

"Joe Papp's essential premise is mistaken," says Schoenbaum. "The BBC series does not preclude a comparable American venture and in fact may stimulate more Shakespeare on television. When we see one *Hamlet*, we want to see another, which is just what happened in Washington the past season—there were two stage productions, each quite different, and both were sellouts. Papp should welcome rather than oppose the BBC project."

Indeed, if the commercial networks are to abandon their current fixation with kiddie porn, it will be because public television proves that a significant audience exists for something bet-

ter. Earlier this year, Joe Papp combined forces with the redoubtable Norman Lear, approaching all three networks with an admirable proposal: a weekly "national theater of the air" featuring American actors in works ranging from Shakespeare and O'Neill to Jason Miller's *That Championship Season*. The hitch was that none of the networks was willing to commit itself to a weekly series. As Norman Lear summed it up, "The ratings competition that exists today has created an atmosphere of fear at all the networks. No one wants to make a big mistake."

Meanwhile back in Britain, the great Shakespeare project moves steadily along. During a recent visit to London, I stopped by for a chat with Cedric Messina, the veteran South Africa-born BBC producer who is in charge. It was an illuminating encounter. Whether American actors can match or excel their English counterparts is a pointless question, which I propose to ignore. What cannot be denied is that this producer has access to a pool of talent with repertory skills unmatched in the rest of the English-speaking world.

Messina, for example, has been able to recruit Derek Jacobi (*Claudius*, in *I, Claudius*) as Richard II and John Gielgud as John of Gaunt in the same play. Jacobi, who portrayed Hamlet last season on the London stage, is also due to repeat the role for BBC. *Much Ado* will feature Michael York as Benedict. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the unforgettable Celia Johnson (*Brief Encounter*) will play the nurse, and Dame Wendy Hiller is appearing as the duchess of York in *Richard II*. Robert Shaw (and who better?) has agreed to play King Lear in what could be the Shakespearean tragedy that will draw the biggest audience in bardic history.

I asked Messina about the employment of leading American actors in major roles. "We've already made approaches," he replied, "but there is a problem of money and film commitments." BBC wages are not astronomical, and production schedules require a firm commitment of time. Big-name American actors appear to be less willing to make sacrifices than their British equivalents, a sad reality that I very much wish Joe Papp would address between the pointless salvos of bricks that he has directed at the wrong target. ●