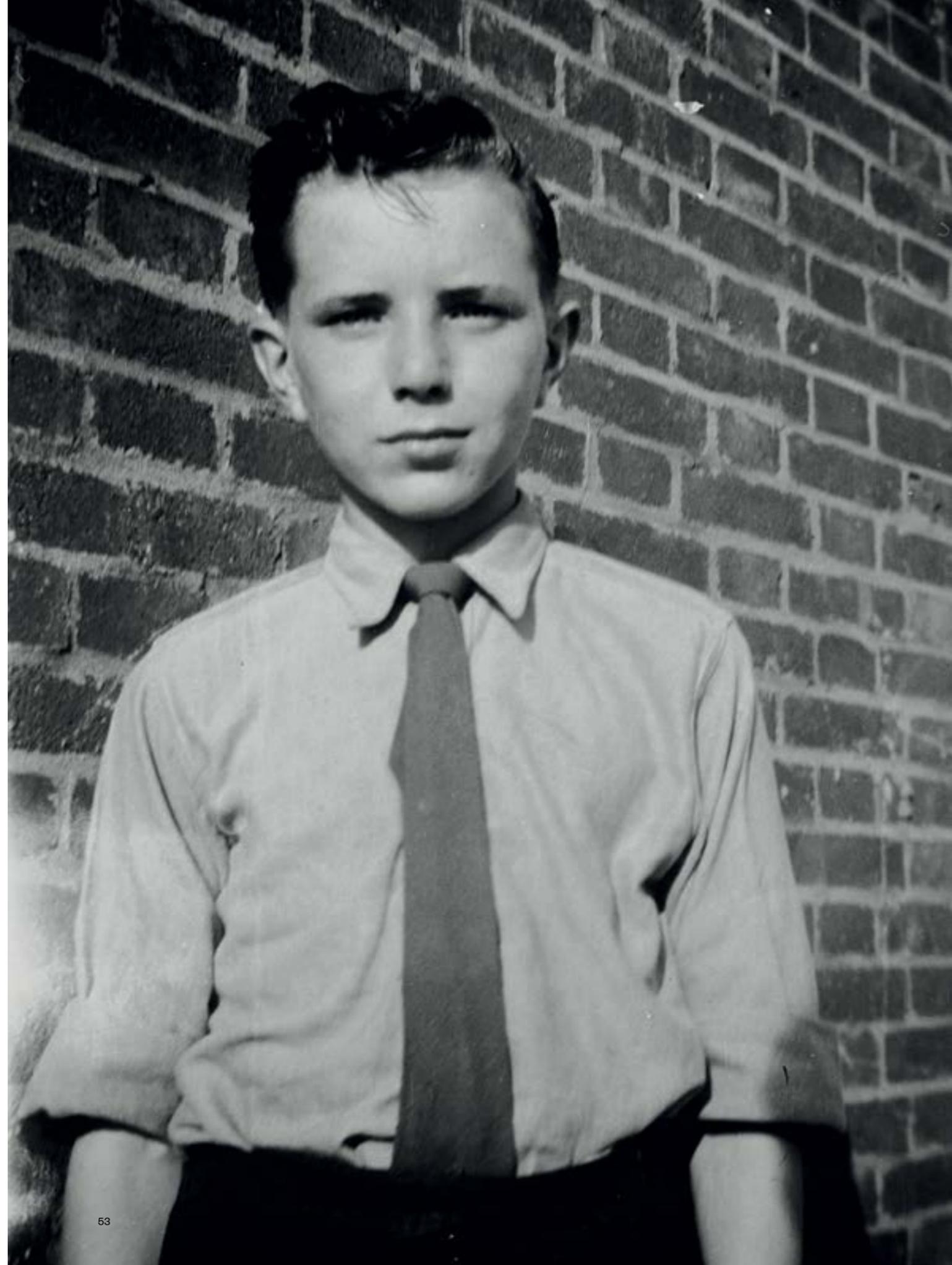


'A Sentimental Bond with the Product': The Veneer of Time

Helen Grace

Sometime in the early eighties — before gentrification had descended on the suburb where I then lived, bathing it in heritage colours and greenery — I came home one day to find my shared house had been trashed, my camera bag gone, along with my Polaroid SX70 camera, cheap jewellery, the new Betamax VCR and the TV. Of all these objects, so often stolen then in endless break and enters, the one whose loss I mourned least was the SX70 because the cost of stock curtailed the delicious pleasure of shooting randomly and seeing more or less instantly what you'd done.

Jacky Redgate
Chiswick, 1953-1984
#10 from the series 'photographer unknown.
A Portrait Chronicle of Photographs,
England 1953-62'
Gelatin silver photograph, 50.5 x 40.7 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra,
KODAK (Australasia) PTY LTD Fund 1986
Courtesy of the artist



In the future, if time proceeds the way it has always done as long as anyone can remember, image historians will 'date' these conglomerations of data we still call photographs by referring to the app through which they were processed. So, instead of identifying an image as a tintype or calotype for example, we will note that the SX70 filter framing of an image observed over 2009 to 2010 belongs to Hipstamatic, or more likely the popular iPhone app ToyCamera, as Instagram was a force yet to be released.

Perhaps we don't care about these things now because new apps keep appearing and we are so immersed in the present, so absorbed within duration itself that we experience time as a continuous instantaneity, barely disrupted by intervals marking the transition from one moment to the next. It now appears that the life cycle itself has become a subspecies of the news cycle, with constant updates, even when nothing is happening.

Interestingly, this absorption within the everyday in its ordinariness is transformed when it is commented upon or imaged because the instant is then separated out of the flow of the ordinary and commonplace, and habitual living ceases to be taken for granted. But the very separation of the instant from the flow of life impacts upon time itself, transforming the instant into a moment, a unit of time that has a specific duration and location. This act of establishing interval, inaugurates discontinuity, rupture, a jolt to the ordinary,

the quotidian, the *Alltäglichkeit*. It produces a brief pause, a moment of reflection, a point where contemplation and distraction meet and dissolve.

Because this intervention into the fluid movement of life is now so reliant on the imaging of the moment — through which its very existence is secured, producing the force of an irresistible 'current of technical images' (the phrase Vilém Flusser uses to describe the flow) — this has a curious retrospective effect upon all images. It's as if a strange suspension and abstraction of time descends upon the image, so that when you look again at historical photographs and snapshots after two or three decades, the whole world appears to have been post-produced or, more specifically, photoshopped.

Digital photography itself has transformed these images, retroactively impacting on analogue photography, in the same way that the present always reconstitutes the past in its own image. But it also has a retro-futuristic effect because images from the past begin to look as if they were made very recently, staged perhaps in a studio set-up, projecting the future merely as an image. The past then appears simply as a filter that gets applied at some moment in the process. Time thus becomes a type of veneer, attached to a suitable substrate and creating affective responses adhered to memory.

The original use of the word filter refers to a piece of cloth (usually felt) through which liquids are passed 'to free them

from matter held in suspension' (Oxford English Dictionary). By contrast, the photographic filter modifies the colour quality of transmitted light, ostensibly without affecting the image. But a new effect of the filter is now apparent in the increasingly popular use of retro-effects, and it is no longer simply light that is filtered but time itself. This filtered time then hardens momentarily into the surface we see, like the fixing stage of a photographic process, before being dissolved again by the next image.

If this sounds like the effect of scrolling through images in a database, this is no accident because digitisation of archives leads to the greater mobilisation of historical images and the discovery of apparently free images, unsecured by individual opacity or official interpretation. An exemplary body of work in this tendency is the ongoing project 'Life After Wartime' (1999–) by Ross Gibson and Kate Richards — whose artist statement gives a good account here of what emerges from the logic of the database:

Freed from the constraints of the analogue archive, digital data can be mapped onto anything with the potential for being inscribed or imprinted. Treated as variable data, our archival material only has a tangential, mimetic relationship to the subject that was recorded and quantified at the initial moment of data collection.

Referentiality dissolved by digitality, indexicality loosened, photography is no longer Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*.

'Life After Wartime' is part of a widespread movement among artists internationally to engage with archival and found images (including the 1980–84 work of early adopter, Jacky Redgate, 'photographer unknown. A Portrait Chronicle of Photographs, England 1953–62'). Although the Surrealists already played with found images, (see Godfrey 2005), there is a melancholy post-war dimension to this impulse (see Buchloh 1993), that is also caught up in anxiety about technology and change. Johanna Zylinska suggests that analogue and found images, both conceptually and materially:

serve as anchors for the wounded self that is trying to locate itself in a world where the roles of the producer and consumer of media images are becoming increasingly blurred. ⁽¹⁴²⁾

Exchange itself feeds into this heightened anxiety about the fate of analogue photography, arising around 1980, before the impact of digital devices was felt. This may have a specific economic source: the cornering of the silver market by the

Hunt Brothers, Texan oil billionaires (in partnership with, allegedly, members of the Saudi royal family, in the aftermath of the Hunts' loss of their Libyan oilfields when Gaddafi nationalised them in 1973). The market cornering saw the silver price rise tenfold through the 1970s, until it crashed on 'Silver Thursday', 27 March 1980, falling to one quarter its boom price. In this period the quantity of silver used in photographic materials diminished as other techniques and image intensification processes were increasingly used to minimise cost. This may be why the flea market collections of earlier photographs begin to appear especially luminescent and desirable.

Pretty soon a mood builds, with anxious sentiments about the future, about the relative permanence and stability of analogue images alongside a feared impermanence of digital images. Writing more recently of Tacita Dean's *Floh* (2001), Mark Godfrey expresses alarm:

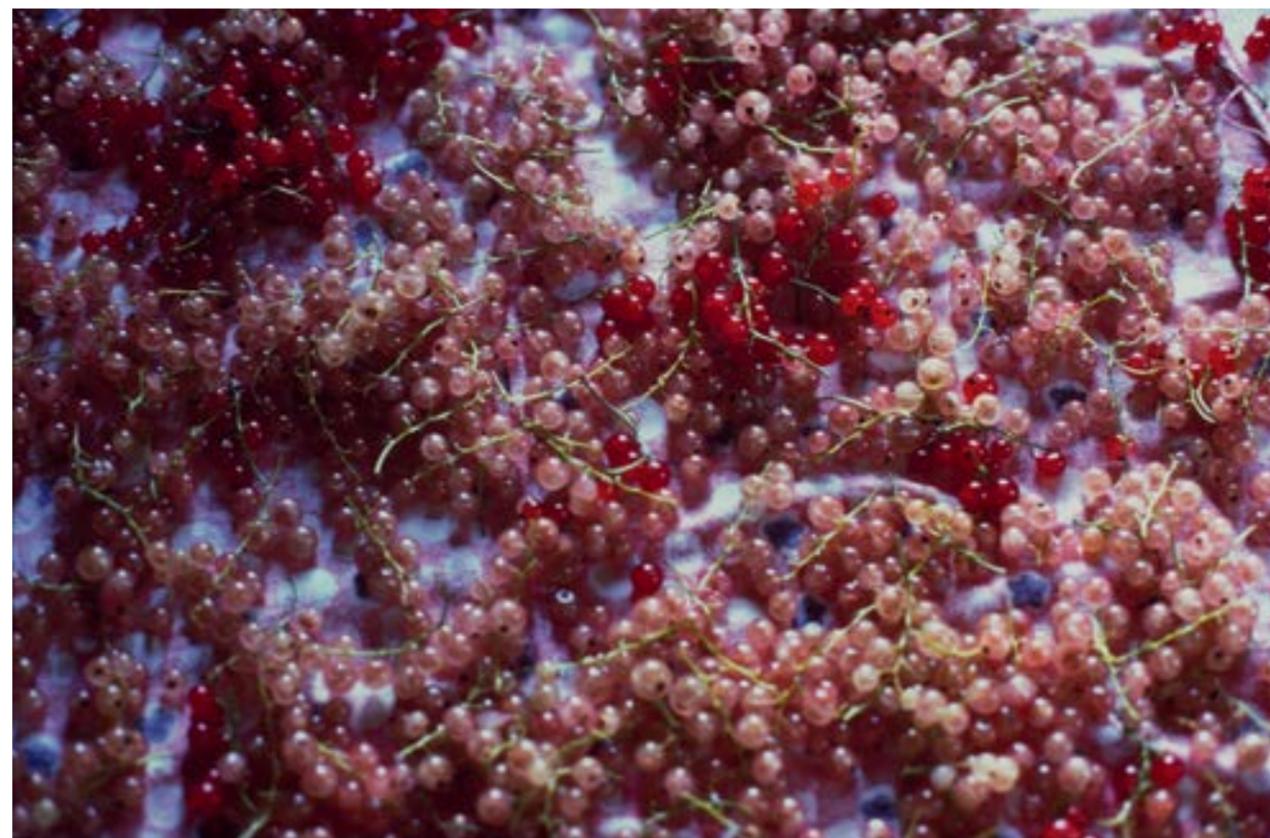
one day soon there will be no more discarded photographs that have been taken, rejected, fingered, scratched, lost, found, and wondered about, no more object/images cluttering our lives. ⁽¹¹⁹⁾

And Tacita Dean herself underlines the fear of artists: "If film print goes then so too does the ability to see my work."

If ominous doom seems to be a key characteristic of high art and intellectual culture by the 1980s, from the 1960s an equal and opposite reaction happens in popular culture, where an embrace of the simplest technology occurs and a manifest joy in the image, with its own manifesto: 'Shoot! Don't Think!'

Between 1963 and 1970, fifty million Instamatic cameras are produced and countless other copies (the Diana camera from Hong Kong, numerous other models from Eastern Europe and from China — all these figures now dwarfed by production figures for iPhones and Android devices: nearly five hundred million iPhones between 2008 and 2013 and perhaps another two billion Android devices). These devices appear as toys, part of low-level plastics manufacture, rather than high end, high tech industries. High and low tech are intricately linked in the outsourcing from the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of low-level manufacturing and assembly of electronic goods, as part of post-war reconstruction aid and Vietnam War military procurement networks. This in turn fuels industry development in 'guerilla capitalist' forms within what are later called 'tiger economies': Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore.

It is precisely the amateur aesthetic of cheap toy cameras in this period that is mobilised in today's retro apps, typified in arguably the first of them: Takayuki Fukatsu's iPhone app ToyCamera, released on 23 October 2008 (right in the middle of the global financial collapse). ToyCamera quickly becomes a top-selling app in Japan, and in Hong Kong where popular culture is widely adopted. Hipstamatic (with a viral back story that mirrors lomography's myth-making narrative) appears fourteen months later and then Instagram in October 2010;



OPPOSITE

Helen Grace

Untitled (from the series 'Imitation of Life') 1996/2013

Cibachrome print, 86 x 121.5 cm

Artbank collection, purchased 2013

FOLLOWING

Helen Grace

Untitled (from the series 'Imitation of Life') 1987/2013

Cibachrome print, 89 x 122 cm

Courtesy of the artist





its dominance secured when Facebook buys it for \$1 billion in April 2012. The post-1980s generation absorbs a 1960s/1970s feel, as benign aesthetic/affective surface, minus the mess and messiness of thought and action from that period, now considered ineffective.

A very strange nostalgia is at play in the popularity of retro apps, a weird projection of lives never lived. We can readily invoke Walter Benjamin's 'aura', Jacques Derrida's 'hauntology', Benjamin Buchloh's 'memory of the camps' or pop culture's ahistorical 'retromania' as shadows, cast on contemporary images that leave a spectral residue. Some might see it as a widespread cultural false memory syndrome and a loss of historical memory. Or perhaps it is a mutation in the memory function itself, influenced by the overload of information to be processed and the outsourcing of human memory to devices; these new mental labour-saving gadgets that process our thought for us as efficiently as washing machines clean our clothes and vacuum cleaners gather up our dust. In any case, the past does appear to be cleansed of some of its troubling trajectories and possibilities even if emulated dust is very carefully added to provide the right amount of authenticity in retro filters.

Don Draper, speaking to us from an imaginary 1962 in a brilliant excerpt from the final episode of *Mad Men* (Season 1, 2007), gives us a neat explanation of what's going on here, by

combining aura, hauntology and traumatic memory. Pitching for the Kodak account to market a new device the company executives have introduced as 'The Wheel', he draws on his own deep memories of loss—authorised by reference to "an old Greek copywriter" who tells him that nostalgia means "the pain from an old wound." In ten tear-jerking takes on his own personal pain, he rebrands the product, 'The Carousel', a vehicle in which infantile memories travel "around and around and back home again to a place where you know you are loved."

But it is his reference to what he calls "a sentimental bond with the product" that contains the kernel of what's at stake in retro-filters. The 1960s/1970s veneer that now filters the present in everyday images shared on social media relies substantially on such a bond; a curious attachment to obscure products that have disappeared. This is not the Carousel or the Instamatic but things that did not make it in the global market at the time — products, in other words, that have failed.

Ross Gibson and Kate Richards
Unhomely 2013
 From the ongoing project 'Life After Wartime'
 Site specific installation for the 2013 International Symposium
 of Electronic Art (ISEA), Sydney
 Courtesy of the artists

When ToyCamera appeared — at a moment that looked like the collapse of capitalism — it transparently emulated the low-quality appeal of the Instamatic. Or more precisely, since the Instamatic was long forgotten, 'lomography'; an analogue photography revival movement that had emerged in the early 1990s — ironically at the time of the (ostensible) collapse of communism and based on a nostalgia (*ostalgie*) for the (relatively) rare products of Soviet industry. In the marketing mythology of the Viennese-based Lomography Society International (a community of photographers and a start-up company, a more opportunistic situational rather than Situationist International), a group of art students are captivated by an apparatus with unpredictable results, found in a Prague camera shop in 1991.

The camera is the Lomo Kompact A (LC-A), a product of a famous St Petersburg optics and technical instrument factory, the Leningrad Union of Optics and Mechanics. Originally a French-Russian joint-venture established in 1914, it produced rifle sites during the First World War, before being nationalised after the revolution and becoming the Factory of State Optics. The Viennese students, by now young entrepreneurs, become collectors of the cameras and enter into an exclusive distribution arrangement with the Russian factory, marketing the devices for two hundred Australian dollars; an exponential mark-up on the original 1983 price of seventy five roubles. In 1996, when the exigencies of post-Soviet reality threaten the continued production of the device, they negotiate with the then Deputy Mayor of St Petersburg, Vladimir Putin to guarantee the product's (temporary) survival. (In 2007, production shifts to China.)

On the Lomo company's Russian website today, there is no celebration, nor even mention of the LC-A. Understandably perhaps, focus is on higher end high tech production in optics and technical systems research; the serious business of competitive global markets and military contracts, rather than the silliness of stupid toy cameras. And besides, the camera could hardly be celebrated because it was already a copy of a copy: a direct copy of the Cosina CX-1, produced in Japan by a company founded by a man whose son was fascinated by the (originally Viennese) Voigtlander cameras, now marketed and manufactured by Cosina.

Devices that are copies of copies, designed to produce poor images, the aesthetic of which is then copied in apps that edit lo-res images that are then widely shared and copied, as far from authenticity as it's possible to get.

None of this media archeological detail needs to be remembered in the proliferation of low-res, using retro-filters rendering the present as already in the past. But the spirit of that history remains as an apparition that emanates from, or leaks into images, just as light leaked into cheap cameras fogging the film. In the traffic of low-res images — circulating surreptitiously as dematerialised data in movement between small screens — it's too easy to dismiss the banality of images as reflecting a poverty of imagination, in the way that amateur images have always been dismissed.

This 'poverty' is also a quality of image democratisation, a resistant alternative to the world of rich images, of exclusive high resolution works produced in limited editions. Hito Steyerl in an eloquent defence of 'poor images' sees them as expressing the contradictions of the contemporary crowd, presenting "a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction."

She reminds us that Vertov once spoke of 'visual bonds' that could link the workers of the world with each other and it's not so hard to see his kino-eye as the non-monetised precursor of contemporary social media's image sharing — although the 'visual bond' he had in mind is a decidedly non-sentimental one. (Vertov 52)

In spite of the completely contrived marketing of retro-devices and apps, it is ironic to find their origins in a largely imaginary Eastern European everyday, of clunky products, pioneer summer camps, picking mushrooms and wild berries in forests, or harvesting potatoes in conscripted labour; of a world of social infrastructure, of public canteens, kindergartens, schools, universities and jobs for life in state factories under the benign control of authoritarian/bureaucratic father-figures. The Cold War had taught us that there was never any joy behind the Iron Curtain and nothing worth preserving. Now in our deterritorialised everyday — where social structures in the West are being dismantled and privatised, jobs are casualised, and the future looks increasingly insecure, where geo-location in our devices is accompanied by a temporo-dislocation in our lives — our images are processed to look like life is some kind of Brezhnevian Black Sea holiday.

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