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The Loss of Analogue: Judy Fiskin and "The End of Photography"

We bear witness to the displacement of analogue. In an era of shifting archival paradigm durability has a fraught relationship to modes and methods of exhibition and preservation. The digital archive exists not simply as a space to store the aging object but as reproducible, pristine catalogue for information. As direct access to the analogue vanishes how effective will the digital archive be in preserving its traces? Even if the digital is able create a record of its analogue predecessors can it truly capture the tactility or organicism of the alternate media? The current simultaneous displacement and preservation of analogue interrogates the ability of one medium to recollect another.

When Walter Benjamin authored his seminal essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he bemoaned the end of an era of artistic authenticity. Benjamin's anxiety was hinged on the loss of the auratic and the shift to a consumerist artistic model.[1] The lynchpin of his essay, the term aura, referred to the uniqueness of a work and the atmosphere created by its singular presence. The term compellingly assigned a substantial value to the way that art makes the spectator feel**.** Benjamin's aura possesses a fundamental legacy in the investigation of emotional experience in a new technological era. Benjamin's work constructs a valuable precedent for the exploration of the relationship between medium and emotional response.

By articulating a shifting artistic paradigm contemporary photographer Judy Fiskin engages the emotional results of the displacement of analogue.

[1] Walter Benjamin "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen Film Theory and Critcisim (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 791.

Fiskin's body of work primarily consists of localized, small-scale vernacular photography, particularly of Southern California. Her short video "The End of Photography" fuses her trademark subject matter with a rumination on the photographic medium. By directly bidding farewell to photography, the video demonstrates the culmination of Fiskin's career-long engagement with memory and personal narrative. By evoking our recollections, the video foregrounds the emotionally charged capabilities of conceptual art. Through the combination of multiple artistic media Fiskin creates a work torn between progress and re-engagement of the past, effectively evoking our memories and feelings of nostalgia.

Made in 2006, "The End of Photography" demonstrates a clear culmination of Fiskin's exploration of memory and experience. Originally shot on Super 8mm film, "The End of Photography" features a series of architectural shots reminiscent of Fiskin's photography. The shots are static as a measured voice begins to speak the lines "What was lost" and then precedes to bid farewell to a variety of photographic elements from the most obvious "No More Film" to the more nuanced and nostalgic "No More Black and White." The last line spoken by the narrator before the film ends is "No More Photography." The video initially appears to be a series of Fiskin's still photographs. However, slight movement is visible within each of the frames: the delicate shakes of a hand-held camera and the wind rustling leaves reveal the piece as moving, and not static as originally thought. Despite the measured tone of the voice-over, the work is surprisingly melancholy. By situating vernacular Los Angeles' against her inventory of lost photographic components Fiskin captures a specific temporal moment: fusing a lost Los Angeles with a lost way of looking. "The End of

Photography" evokes both memories of the city as it once was, and the primary method of preserving our recollections.

In engaging memory, nostalgia and shared history, "The End of Photography" destabilizes linear temporality and merges the past with the present. The first line "What was lost" assumes a time in which photography is already absent, an imagined or anticipated future in which photography's end has come and gone. This future is suggested by both the grammar of the voice over and in the piece's technical construction. "The End of Photography" offers the tools to evoke one's recollections but excludes the photograph. Though shot on Super 8mm, its presentation in a digital format suggests a temporal moment of complete photographic displacement. The film's construction occurred when analogue was available and yet upon reaching the spectator only digital remains. The grain of the Super 8mm is still visible in the digital format. The scratches, dust and texture insist on the piece's filmic roots, reminding the viewer of the presence of film but denying it to them. By presuming an impending future and subsequently blending the present with the past "The End of Photography" instigates a kind of temporal collapse. We bid farewell to the photograph but are active participants in its preservation. The digital format insists on a preservation that is ingrained in the memory of the spectator as opposed to the diegesis of the video.

By using Super 8mm Fiskin implements the ultimate American mode of capturing and constructing memories. When it debuted in the mid 1960s, Kodak specifically marketed Super 8mm to non-professional filmmakers. Like its predecessor, 8mm film, Super 8mm's small gauge and affordability allowed democratic access to film production. This accessibility situated the medium as

the first vehicle for making amateur and personal films. Due to its association with home as opposed to commercial modes of production, 8mm film maintains a privileged position in the preservation of personal and collective experiences. In countless home movies and perhaps most famously in the *Zapruder Film* 8mm is the medium that preserves moving memory. The technology's association with American history has gained cultural clout to the point that the format's aesthetic was appropriated for the opening credits of *The Wonder Years*, arguably America's most nostalgic television show.[2]

Super 8mm is a medium that was already ostensibly abandoned by the time Judy Fiskin made "The End of Photography." In her essay "8mm: American Images & the Art of the Everyday" Jytte Jensen describes the recognizable aesthetic and tactility of the format: "And then there is the film itself the sensuous texture of the projected image, the subtlety or sumptuousness of gradations in the black-and-white or discriminating use of color, the graininess of the image (as emotionally satisfying and particular as the actual silver sparkles on 35mm nitrate stock), the unpredictability of the sound stripe, and the fragility and fleeting sense of the image's presence on the screen."[3] Super 8mm's identifiable aesthetic aligns a specific visual quality with recording the American past. Super 8mm embodies both a lost time and a lost a medium. Through her use of Super 8mm Fiskin recalls both the amateur filmmaking of the 1950s and 1960s and draws our attention to the fundamentally displaced and abandoned.

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[2] Airing from 1988 until 1993 *The Wonder Years*, was an American television show set in the late 1960s, that chronicled famed historical events such as the Vietnam War from the perspective of a suburban high school student. The opening credits of each episode featured a series of fake 8mm home movies set to the song "With a Little Help From My Friends."

[3] Jyette Jensen "8mm: America Images & the Art of the Everyday" ed.Albert Kilchesty Big As Life: An American History of 8mm Films (San Francicsco Cinemateque: 1998) 16.

Albert Kilchesty writes: "Corporate manipulation of consumers and the subsequent transformation of the world by digital media have effectively stripped a once-thriving 8mm culture of its vitality. The disappearance of 8mm equipment and services – the few surviving film stocks which remain are becoming both expensive and scarce, cameras and projectors can now in many cases no longer be repaired if broken to a dearth of available parts."[4] By using a medium that has transformed from being highly democratic to utterly inaccessible Fiskin directly accesses both our memory and foregrounds a nearly totalizing case of analogue displacement. The video's imagined, photo-less, future leaves the spectator to dually consider what once was and what the world will become.

The direct engagement of memory privileges certain spectators over others. This selectivity is a necessary component of "The End of Photography's" ability to elicit an emotional response. Someone versed in Fiskin's oeuvre is aware of the absent photographs and recognizes the likeness between the architectural footage and her earlier work. The voice-over narration also recalls personal experience. We hear an inventory of the items in a dark room: film, canisters, reels, dodging tool, sink, apron. The viewer might contextualize the items in relation to his own experiences with photography. The description invites the spectator to reference his personal narrative and to rediscover the times when he was surrounded by these items. The voice-over is measured, even monotone in its frank account of the lost inventory. David Pagel described the piece by stating: "The sense of loss intensifies as it becomes clear that Fiskin is

[4]Steve Anker "Big As Life" ed.Albert Kilchesty Big As Life: An American History of 8mm Films (San Francicsco Cinemateque: 1998) 3

not bidding farewell to mere objects but to the ethos, character and sensibility the daily use of these things engendered, sustained and rewarded. With little fanfare, her melancholic movie makes you wonder how digital technology will change the way the world looks and, more importantly, the people doing the looking."[5] By listing the items in her dark room in such specificity Fiskin considers the absence of each component of the photographic process as opposed to exclusively referencing the medium in its entirety. Her list explores the means of creating and experiencing photography. The statement "No more black and white" directly recalls abstract experience and speaks to the nuances of recollection.

Fiskin offers the tools to spark one's memory but the rest of the narrative resides in the mind of the spectator. The connections are forged by one's own experiences and understanding of the photographic apparatus. The necessity of a subjective, active spectator situates the video in a curious position in relation to the idea of Conceptual Art. Though exhibited in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's conceptual art show, "The End of Photography" inspires both intellectual and emotional responses. In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" Sol Lewitt describes art rooted in idea instead of execution and emphasizes mental as opposed to emotional provocation[6]. Lewitt uses this distinction to set up a binary that aligns conceptual art with the cerebrally active spectator and the emotional spectator with aesthetic, perceptual movements like abstract expressionism. However, this binary is complicated by an emotional piece that demands mental activism on the part of the spectator. "The End of Photography"

[5] David Pagel "Farewell to an art, to an era" Los Angeles Times 2008, online, www.judyfiskin.com
[6] Sol Lewitt "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" Art Forum (Summer 1967).

deliberately draws upon a preexisting body of knowledge and the ability to contribute an understanding of the photograph. Fiskin provides a barren description and allows the spectator to contribute his own memories. In activating nostalgia Fiskin manages to fuse the emotive and cerebral.

The idea of nostalgia resides in the realm of the contradictory: it suggests an inability to reconcile a linear temporality, an impregnation of the present with the past. Though the word nostalgia has Greek roots, nostos meaning return home and algia meaning longing, it was actually coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss doctor, to describe sadness experienced by soldiers separated from their homeland[7]. The pathology diagnosed by Hofer described a longing for home, for return, a desire to go back and regain what was lost or distant. Its common usage incorporates these roots but emphasizes another component of home, focusing on a lost time instead of place. To experience nostalgia is to desire a home and moment that can never be regained and yet these compulsions complicate the present.

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym writes "Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values."[8] An actual return to the past is impossible and yet the desire for this past integrates it into the present. Temporal slippage occurs as one re-authors and revisits his memories. "The End of Photography" presents both a vanishing artistic paradigm and a lost Los Angeles and in doing so suggests the impending digital future. The video collapses two temporal experiences: what was lost and what is to be. Fiskin exclusively depicts

[7] Svetlana Boym The Future of Nostalgia (New York: Basic Books, 2001) xiii.
[8] Boym, 8

the disappearing Los Angeles, allowing the present and future of the city to reside in the mind of the spectator. The anticipated homogenization and streamlining is constructed based on one's own awareness of his surroundings. This imbues the piece with a contradictory temporal urgency and timelessness. The video's focus on loss and nostalgia resists the passage of time. However the ambiguous treatment of the future of Los Angeles accommodates a changing spectatorial perspective. A spectator from an imagined future lends his own knowledge of what is to come to Fiskin's document of what was lost. If Fiskin is an artist that manages to unearth an atmosphere that would otherwise be neglected then the loss of her camera, frame and vision will cause her atmospheric, vernacular Los Angeles to disappear.

Through her remembrance of photography Judy Fiskin activates the over-arching experience of nostalgia. We both remember photography and are aware of the way that the photograph makes us remember. Photography exists in a fraught position between progression and regression. It is both the art form that exists because of technological, modernist progress and a perpetual preoccupation with the past. In his book, *Camera Lucida,* Roland Barthes writes "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there.* There is a superimposition her: of reality and of the past."[9] Photographs show what once was but do not exclusively uphold such a linear reading of the passage of time. In viewing landscape photographs Barthes said "This longing to inhabit… is fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself…Looking at these landscapes of predilection, it is as if *I were certain* of having been there or

[9] Roland Barthes Camera Lucida trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 76.

going there." [10]This ability to engage both a past and future, to move simultaneously forewords and backwards is directly elaborated in Fiskin's piece. An imagined future is used to remember the past. This temporal collapse speaks to the idea of nostalgia itself. Boym writes: "a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images- of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface."[11] It is seemingly impossible to capture the experience of nostalgia and yet its contradictory nature seems ingrained in photography. It is an experience of the past in the present, an elliptical, non-linear temporal collapse.

In remembering photography Fiskin emphasizes all of the components that make the medium unique. However, her video also documents an artistic trajectory, encompassing still photography, moving images and finally arriving on digital. This enacts a simultaneous engagement and rejection of the notion of medium specificity. Fiskin is precise and deliberate in her account of the photographic, focusing on a medium that is clearly linked to a specific mode of production. She forges strong boundaries around the art form and designates the photograph based on the very characteristics that separate it from a digital paradigm. "The End of Photography" is marked by the loss of film, print washer, drying screens and darkness. However, Fiskin uses the digital medium as the tool to articulate this loss, suggesting an era when photography and the notion of medium specificity are displaced. Fiskin insists on a distinction between digital and analogue while authoring an active dialogue between the mediums. This

[10] Barthes 40.
[11] Boym xiv.

blending negates the self-reflexive explorations that were fundamental to the formalist and structural art of the 1970s. For Fiskin, the most effective mode of exploring photography is not self-reflexivity; it is the provocation of the spectator.

The "End of Photography's" entanglement with the memory of the spectator situates one's relationship with the piece in a specific cultural moment. The video relies on the ability to recall a time before the end of photography. However, this creates a relationship with the audience in flux, suggesting unpredictable responses from spectators without the same emotional referents. By excluding photography from the piece's presentation Fiskin creates a work that depends upon a vanishing collective memory. Sol Lewitt insisted on subjectivity in his discussion of conceptual art, stating: "Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way."[12] Since "The End of Photography" demands spectatorial engagement it will perpetually exist in the realm of transformation, with the evolving audience reauthroing the nature of the work. In *The Future of Nostalgia* Boym writes of a man who "Possessed by nostalgia, (forgot) his actual past." Perhaps the ability to feel nostalgia for an imagined history will allow the spectator to mourn the loss of the unknown emotional referent. This possibility suggests that "The End of Photography's" melancholy farewell evokes both actual experiences and imagined pasts to create a temporal fusion that moves time in all directions instead of simply forwards.

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[12] Lewitt

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