Kodachrome Memory

AMERICAN PICTURES 1972–1990

Nathan Benn

The Unintentional Archive

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American photographs are not simple depictions but constructions. . .
the history they show is inseparable from the history they enact:
a history of photographers employing their medium to make sense of their society. [1]

—ALAN TRACHTENBERG

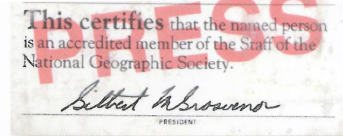
When the Eastman Kodak Company announced that it was ceasing production of its iconic Kodachrome film after 74 years, enthusiasts of the brand were granted one reprieve. From June 2009 through the end of 2010, Dwayne's Photo in Parsons, Kansas, would be the only lab in the world to continue processing Kodachrome rolls until they, too, would run out of supplies and stop developing the transparency film.[2] From Dorothy's Oz to the Obama family tree, Kansas exists in the cultural psyche as a crossroads, the prototypical place from which to flee and/or return home. Kodachrome's die-hard devotees flocked to Parsons to develop their last rolls at Dwayne's, briefly adding to this mystique. The one-time "film of the future" was now being put out to pasture in the American heartland.

At Kodachrome's peak only about 25 facilities around the world were equipped to develop the popular film, but most of them had already shuttered in the previous decades. While amateur and professional photographers had long moved toward digital image capture, and transparency libraries had already become attic ephemera, Kodak's announcement completed the cultural shift. Those seeking the film's rich color range and capacity to handle complexities of light would have to seek other options, including easier-to-develop films, point-and-shoot cameras, and Adobe Photoshop's postproduction retouching tools. But enthusiasts mourned its passing as untimely. This was the demise of a technological innovation that had been central to American imagery and had spanned several generations' sense of place.

Around the time Kodachrome entered its final days, Nathan Benn returned to a warehouse near Washington, D.C.—his base as a photographer for *National Geographic*—ready to look again at a body of work that he had relegated to storage for nearly two decades. The warehouse held 44 cartons containing about 350,000 mostly unpublished transparencies that he took in the 1970s and 1980s when he traveled and published extensively for

1 Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1989) xvi.

2 Kodachrome Discontinuation Notice, http://www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=15359&pq-locale=en_US&_requestid=8244, accessed 1 January 2013.



the quintessential photo-explorers' publication. For much of the twentieth century, Kodachrome had served as both a medium and motif for representing locations far and near through richly saturated color images. The proliferation of color photography through mass-circulation magazines fueled the age of domestic consumer identity, pacing the rises of Cold War tourism, television media, and eventually, personal computing. In 1973, at the height of the film's popularity, Paul Simon penned the song "Kodachrome," singing to a personification of the film: "Kodachrome/ You give us those nice bright colors/ You give us the greens of summers/ Makes you think all the world's a sunny day." But Simon's adoration was as much about honoring vibrant hues as it was a dismissal of a tradition. He adds, "My sweet imagination/ And everything looks worse in black and white."[3] Whereas the previous century's photographs often served as documentary evidence or *memento mori*, Kodachrome's popularity revealed the lateral movement of time. Kodachrome was protosocial media packaged for consumption by the public eye, used to sell stories of places visited and private lives lived.

Nathan Benn is a boomer, born in 1950 to Jewish parents who met in Miami. His mother was a stenographer from Detroit; his father was talented in his family's trade of needlework and served in the U.S. Army Corps during World War II salvaging damaged uniforms and tents. As a kid, Benn's wanderlust was stoked by days spent at Miami's Florida East Coast railroad station, watching snowbirds disembark from streamlined passenger trains.

Benn's photographic inquiry began during his formative years. His childhood was rooted in Miami just as the racially and culturally segregated city was welcoming its first Cuban exile refugees. Along with fears of nuclear war and racial tension, the culture bent toward the possibilities of social justice. As a teenager, Benn was gifted a camera and snapped photos for his high school paper. He worked his way through the University of Miami as a photographer for the *Miami News* and *Palm Beach Post*, respectively.

In June 1972, hours after his college graduation, Benn headed up I-95 towards Washington, D.C., to begin an internship at *National Geographic*. If Kodachrome was once the dominant mode of capturing color images, *National Geographic* served as its greatest cultural platform. The National Geographic Society was founded in 1888 by elite men in the posh private confines of the Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C., with the

3 Paul Simon, "Kodachrome," *There Goes Rhymin' Simon* (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Bros, 1987).

goal of "organizing a society for the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge."[4] Photography quickly became its greatest mapping tool. For many generations of Americans, the sight of the magazine's yellow spine on a bookshelf is an emblem of a promised voyage and of the owner's claim on a command of visual rhetoric.

Benn's photographs from that summer were unmemorable, but he developed a story proposal that would launch his tenure of nearly 20 years at the publication. Inspired by literature professor Helen Fagin, a Holocaust survivor, Benn sought out remnants of European *shtetl* culture in America. Living for several months at the intersection of Lee and Hewes Avenues in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, he photographed the world of Hasidic Jews. Like Leonard Freed before him (in a different corner of the borough), Benn photographed as an estranged but distantly related landsman longing for immersion. Robert E. Gilka, the legendary director of the photographic staff at *National Geographic*, hired Benn on the basis of this assignment, providing him with an office, cameras, unlimited film, a generous expense account, and leads to pursue across the globe.

When *National Geographic* was a vessel of mid-twentieth century American ideation and ethnocentricity, Kodachrome was its gold standard. According to Mark Collins Jenkins, by the mid-1950s, the magazine's legions of photographers "were carrying portable 35mm cameras loaded with Kodachrome film... the magazine's Kodachrome photography was admired around the world."[5] The *National Geographic* sent photographers out for months with big budgets, underwritten by more than ten million paying subscribers. *National Geographic* color images anchored the text, not the other way around, and generations of photographers and viewers alike learned how to read images from its pages. As critics such as Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins argue, the prowess of the publication was in part due to its reputation for photographs that depicted subjects as unfamiliar, and framed inhabitants as exotic others rather than agents of knowledge themselves.[6] But the photographs also suggest a middle ground, a space to develop critical visual acumen, to consider the *National Geographic* as training readers to view the world from an environmentally and socially conscious perspective.

To acknowledge *National Geographic*'s twin roles as cultural juggernaut and tool of connectivity is to revisit Benn's work from this period and encounter the country's tectonic social order shifting. Benn was calibrating

4 Mark C. Jenkins, *On Assignment with National Geographic: The Inside Story of Legendary Explorers, Photographers, and Adventurers* (Washington, D.C: National Geographic Society, 2013) 10.

5 *National Geographic* published its first photograph in 1890; its first color image appeared in July 1914. Mark C. Jenkins, "Images that Captivated the World," *USA Today Special Edition: National Geographic Society Turns 125*, January 2013, 32.

6 See Catherine Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print).

his sense of photographic narrative and form at the same time that contemporaries including William Eggleston, Nan Goldin, and Joel Meyerowitz were independently exploring color documentary photography at the margins of social boundaries. Through Benn's thoughtful approach and keen eye we may visualize a mapping of America in these interwar periods.

Benn's *Kodachrome Memory* is separated into distinct sections based on location. However, he seeks a national geography that coheres as an ensemble, and that has no true spatial center. His American images attest that the magazine's focus in the latter part of the twentieth century also evinced the nation's complex historical layers, marking its pages as one place to view economic displacement and social upheaval in its continued assessment of place. Transnational approaches to American culture remind us that the global proxy battles of the Cold War and globalizing U.S. economy wrought domestic crises that spanned national borders. Benn was charged in the 1970s with imaging the crisp foliage and peeling paint of the old Yankee hills of Vermont and Massachusetts impacted by the shift toward a post-industrial economy. In 1980 he was assigned to capture the spectrum of tropical sheens and fluorescent reflections in his native Florida, which was transformed by waves of new immigration, illicit drug trade, and environmental crises. No matter the situational context, when choosing for print, Benn's editors tended to prefer mostly panoramic or didactic images: those taken from a birds-eye or illustrative photographs, rather than those that reflected finer gradations and shades of social relations with complex contexts.

Between frames clearly aimed at his *National Geographic* editors, Benn had produced much of what appears in *Kodachrome Memory*: a search for the middle distance between his lens and his subjects that purposed alienation, dislocation, and the uncanny as productive elements of national culture. Like a greatest hits album comprised solely of B-sides, Benn's alternate images—color photographs that play with temporal layers, then and now—extend outward from their assigned contexts to experiment with their form. These images exemplify the *National Geographic* cartographic ethos while simultaneously highlighting the subtlety of identity, image, and place. Benn unearths America's own unintentional archive; he depicts a nation bursting at its seams, beautifully and painfully straining, and transforming anew from the raw materials and symbolic referents of its past that had once been its emblems of futurity.

Icons of national identity are not merely celebratory or gratuitous, but offer us strange temporalities and off-kilter glances with curiosity and reverence, from the vantage of the refracted mirrors in the visitor parking lot at Cape Canaveral [page 163], to a weary Tennessee Williams poolside in leisure wear rubbing his eyes [page 156], to a statue of William Shakespeare wrapped tightly in blue tarp [page 123]. Benn imagines many of his subjects as thinking about their own locatedness, even in scenarios they actively seek to hold onto or revise. In his photographs, there is plenty of visible social turmoil, but also scenes in which such disquiet is nearly sublimated into the stillness of the depicted scene.

In "Cleveland, Mississippi, 1973" [page 59], for example, Benn photographs a young white woman with a pursed smile and bouffant hairdo while she waits for an interstate bus to take her northward to Chicago. The delicate color palette conveys that this is an evening encounter, and she is primed for an overnight trip. Wearing a plaid overcoat, unbuttoned but drawn closed by her hands in the side pockets, she stands quietly in front of a Coca-Cola machine. The young woman dresses with cosmopolitan flair, but is neither restrained nor at ease in a bus station in a small Mississippi town. The racial subtext of interstate travel between Southern and Northern states is present given the state's infamous history of jailing Freedom Riders who entered segregated bus depots a decade earlier. Was this station part of the old Jim Crow architecture? What was its status as an integrated space now? The station context is largely left out of the photograph's field of vision. From Benn's perspective, his subject is framed tightly alongside mere traces of human activity, including half of an empty waiting chair and return rack of opaque glass bottles on one side of the vending machine. This is a space of transition in more ways than one.

In another portrait, blue-blooded Neil Ayer, the Master of Foxhounds of the Myopia Hunt in Wenham, Massachusetts, stands tall in a radiant red riding coat and pristine white ascot [page 23]. Like the young woman at the bus station, the subject's sartorial identity and posture is emphasized through spatial relationships in the setting. Benn positions Ayer standing stiffly before an imposing but cold fireplace; on the mantle is a clock and a sepia portrait of Ayer's deceased father in a similar outfit. The afternoon light shadows much of Ayer's face, leaving the room behind him almost devoid of color, infusing the setting with the eerie sense of foreboding and loss found in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. The image's color range conveys vitality, but also

faded glory. The tradition depicted here is as staid as it is suggestively at risk. Other Benn images, like a wall of wooden industrial spools [pages 34–35], or sun-stretched patio chairs on a front porch [page 155]—objects that seem to belong to the past—evoke this same tension. Benn leverages color to remind us of the relativity of time, of contemporaneity that also evokes uncertainty and obsolescence.

These quieter moments allow Benn to explore some louder clashes, especially where racial realities of the post-Civil Rights era remain held in place. Sometimes the results are violent, even if the viewer's shock doesn't register for participants in the scene. Benn offers neither romantic gloss nor simple rebuke. Instead he is drawn to spaces in which the unspoken social codes are revealed for a moment, even when it is clear the photographer, who has used his camera as a tool of empowered navigation, has himself been pulled into rattled observation. We see two perspectives of the so-called new service economy as channeled through the history of racialized and gendered domestic service: In one image [page 71], Benn seems to stand in the way of a faded matriarch who is hollering from her porch seat for a maid to refill a glass with iced tea (a call made with hands cupped around her mouth for amplification across a perceived distance). In another [page 72], a uniformed African American worker with bright, red-heeled shoes sneaks her lunch in a back stairwell, contorting both for strained comfort and perhaps also in reproach at the photographer for stealing a glance of this private moment. Here and across the collection, Benn finds the in-between frequencies and sight lines of the enduring status quo.

In another image [page 129], two men who have worked in the seasonal sugar cane harvest await departure at the Miami International Airport. As cross-border migrants, these men are a part of a downplayed but fundamental part of the American workforce. Benn approaches to take a frontal portrait and is met with wary, reproachful glares. Even with a palpable tension existing between Benn and his subjects, he attempts to meet them in a dignified framing. The sharply dressed men stand out against the bare wall behind them. In the foreground, one man faces Benn but twists his torso to the side. He leans one hand against the odd airport prop of a ladder; his other placed on his hip reveals a bright kerchief in his back pocket. His counterpart stands behind, if not underneath, the ladder, his outfit pulled together with a horseshoe belt buckle carrying the inscription, "Peace and Love." Amidst these symbols of American mobility and superstition, the photograph's ultimate standout detail: each man wears two hats stacked in tandem. Whether

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we imagine this doubling as a matter of a traveler's utility or swagger, Benn's photograph reminds us that our collective sense of identity and place remains full of riddles.

Life on the road eventually wore Benn down. In 1991, he put down his camera and stored away the material remnants of his life as a photographer. Despite his absorbing and growing body of work on the American social landscape, he sought new beginnings out from behind the lens.[7] In the act of moving on (and not anticipating a return to his archive), Benn left his identity as a photographer and his cache of Kodachrome images behind. As it turned out, Kodachrome was a relatively stable image medium, especially compared with color films like Ektachrome and Fujichrome that often fade noticeably in a single generation. These were images built with a stable dye set that, if stored even with slight awareness, could survive without obvious decay. When Benn returned to the warehouse, he sought to reconcile his time as a photographer—when the defining practices of color photography remain unmoored and in process—with the new question of how to manage his Kodachrome in this contemporary period. The last moments of the Kodachrome era had finalized a process for color photographs in the cultural imagination: color was no longer reserved for the vibrant capture of the present, but could confer returns to a past imbued with hues as bygone accents. Benn's work could have easily ended up discarded, but his urge to look back grew as time passed, and since he made the images, the profession's sea change revealed this collection as a depository of memory and American culture in the unforeseen waning years of the Kodachrome era.

The task of attaining knowledge is both a science and an inexhaustible pursuit; hence the storied cultural practice of maintaining stacked copies of *National Geographic*. One issue, let alone one image, is never enough. Like a lost issue of *Geographic*, we see visions of the past and hopeful progress as sparking a dialectic. The craft of photography continues to recode itself, with new technologies nonetheless shaped by the aging artifacts and mythologies of the medium. Kodachrome's history and evolving memory coexist through creative reprise. Our nation's monumental strivings are given circuitous but expected pause. Nathan Benn offers a photographic treatment for the hangover of historical change—not to cure, but to remind us to slow down, to look around and at one another: to mark the passing of time, the movement of people and ideas, in his moments of capture and now in our moments of retrieval. Suspended, in a time and space of our own invention.

7 Benn had stepped away from the guild, but not the business. He never left the world of photography. His ventures included powerful innovations to Internet services allowing for the viewing and selling of images online (that he sold with partners to Kodak) and tenure as the president of renowned international photographer's collective, Magnum.