Documentative Polaroid Project on Bahrain:
exploring the elements of mediating sentiment
Sheyma Buali

Abstract (E): Author’s comment on the creative work on Polaroid photography and memory presented in the appendix.

Abstract (F): Présentation par l’artiste du projet artistique sur le recours aux images polaroid dans la représentation d’un lieu de mémoire (travail reproduit en annexe).

Keywords: Bahrain, colonialism, photography, Polaroid, postcolonial

While photography as a whole has been referred to as a ‘sentimental’ activity or product (Barthes, 21), Polaroids in particular have had many more specific associations of the past linked to them. Collector and photographer Martin Parr once referred to the Polaroid as “processed nostalgia” (O’Hagan). Currently it has been linked to the analogue revival and the retro photographic fashion currently sweeping the world of fad photography. In my ongoing project, the subject of this paper, I chose the Polaroid as my medium for all of these reasons and more.

My Polaroid project, a project that includes both photography as well as accompanying written contextualization, aims to document Bahrain while attempting to mediate memories instilled within the subjects photographed. The collection is comprised of about 40 images at the point of writing this paper. On a mission to visually record Bahrain’s endangered culture, the scenes (locations) and objects photographed are ones that exemplify ‘old’ Bahrain. They include a mix of traditional locations and objects: some of private value, other more public, some of which are iconic and others that represent the banal. Images include old wooden doors, the Bahrain Fort, my grandparents’ houses, a public telephone and so on. Combining the two elements of the picture that signify areas an objects of memories, in addition to my mission to document, it was my attempt to use this cultural iconography of both the subject of the image and the object of the Polaroid to capture a sentimental value of the subject represented. The question to be explored asks, what element of the representation, photographic object, or contextualization does the sentiment communicate from?
The Object: What is in a Polaroid?
Theoretical justification that lead to my choosing the Polaroid as documentation tool holds its basis in Marshall McLuhan’s text *The Medium is the Massage*. This text being the inspirational core, the general ideas of ‘how’ a message is being made is here almost as relevant as the message itself. Having chosen the Polaroid as the ‘how’ in this equation, one must look at the parts of the Polaroid that make it the medium that communicates the ‘massage’ best. What makes it a *massage*, in the McLuhan-esque designation of message, is that it is understood through a process of seeing to understand what is being conveyed by a number of signifiers within the media, that is the learned symbols within the quality of the image as well as the object of the Polaroid picture create a mythical understanding of it being something old (McLuhan). The medium is comparable to the subject on a number of levels. The Polaroid is a vintage icon. Today, it is considered endangered and subject to many reproductions mimicking that same, vintage effect, much like the subjects of the pictures in the documentation project. Furthermore, the impossibility of reproducing the Polaroid picture is parallel to the fact that it is impossible to reproduce scenes and objects of the past. Finally, as a foreign medium, the produced object of the photograph creates something of a distance that allows the subject to stand out more boldly by way of cultural significance. The Polaroid is a quintessentially American product. Having made it to Europe eventually, it was first made famous in 1960’s United States (“A History of Polaroid”). Thus, a fragmentation is not only occurring with the timing of the production of the pictures versus the subject of the pictures, but also in its cultural visual value; while the Polaroid itself is a very Western visualization, the subject represents objects that are essentially Bahraini and Eastern. Ultimately, what is created is an anachronism of vintage photographic object versus vintage subject for photographic representation (yet contemporarily produced) simultaneously with a near/far contradiction of Western object versus Eastern subject.

The Subjects:
The wooden doors, the Bahrain Fort, a public telephone are each publicly recognized and thus have a certain social value. Each has its own iconography, carrying a symbol of something old and Bahraini. The wooden doors are a cultural icon of Bahrain and the Gulf. Hand made doors of a particular design were the typical entrance to homes of traditional local architecture. The Bahrain Fort is a historic site that spans more than 4000 years, thus many generations grew up visiting, picnicking, playing and photographing the ruins. Today it is the symbol of the Delmonic civilization and internationally renowned as being listed as a
UNESCO World Heritage Site. The public telephone, though it has a more modern connotation represents an almost obsolete gadget in a country where it is rare not to own a mobile phone. Clearly stamped on it, is one of the old logos of Bahrain’s national telephone company which, at the time of the telephone’s production, was the only telephone company in the country.

My grandparents’ houses clearly hold a more personal value. Photographing them has a value on a familial level holding important individual family histories. These images can also be said to have importance as valued spaces that hold many memories within them. Besides being previous generations’ homes, they also represent architectural differences and tradition. The emotional value here is clear as it is linked to people who have a certain attachment to these locations. In both of these broader categories, the context is placed based on history as well as social (collective) and personal memory. Barthes speaks of the “regional essences (deriving, for instance from aesthetics, from History, from Sociology)” (21). The question remains though, whether or not this sentimental memory value is captured in the photographs simply because they represent ‘essences’ that are indeed derived from history and sociology. The phenomenon that is sought after is referred to as affect; as Barthes questioned, is it possible to “retain an affectiveness intentionally, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria?” (21)

In asking these questions and making his remarks, Barthes speaks as a viewer as opposed to my role as producer. In his book Camera Lucida, Barthes is looking for the photograph of his recently deceased mother that carries the most affect representing his mother’s personality and feeling. Barthes introduces the Latin word studium, which does not necessarily reflect the idea of ‘study’ but more so, the ability to apply certain knowledge to an image (26). One must be a catalyst of what they see in a photograph based on what they know in terms of ethics, culture, politics and so on in addition to their own subjective knowledge or feeling about the given subject in the image. The images of my documentative Polaroid project create a picture of Bahrain within a certain traditional, nostalgic theme. “To recognize the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the studium derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers” (27-28). This, in effect, places much importance on the context of the image, not
only as presented by the producer, but more importantly as it is received (or understood) by the viewer.

**Context and the Written Accompaniment:**

In his project Polaroids from the Dead, Douglas Coupland looks at a collection of Polaroid pictures he finds in a drawer and laments on them. He breaks the book into three sections, the first of which deals directly with ‘nostalgia’. “Nostalgia is never far off in the first ten pieces of Polaroids, which portray an assorted bunch of these hippies and neo-hippies … going to a Grateful Dead concert” (Vandromme). Vandromme doesn’t go on to explain why these are ‘not far from nostalgia’, but perhaps we can question that it may have to do with the idea that within the book, written in the 1990’s, there is a chronology and this particular section falls into the first, referring to the photographs as the ‘most nostalgic’ or carrying the clearest image from Coupland’s memory. Coupland’s project can be seen as somewhat the opposite of the project subject of this paper. While Coupland is re-contextualizing Polaroids taken in the past that he stumbled upon, the said project of this paper uses the medium to take pictures of objects and scenes that signify the past. The anachronisms here go in opposite directions. Whereby instead of recontextualizing yesterday’s context today, I am attempting to recreate yesterday’s context today. An argument is added here that says that these pictures are no longer ‘just pictures’, but pieces of art due to their historic and cultural value. This inclusion of the term ‘art’ in the description of either of these projects is inconsequential since the project subject to this paper can be seen as art for the same reasons: the anachronistic defragmented cultural object versus cultural subject. “They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information” (Sontag quoted by Vandromme).

Thus revisiting the question of how the photographs in the ‘documentative Polaroid project on Bahrain’ carry sentimental value, one can answer, based on the theory discussed, that they are carried through all parts of the overall project: the object of the Polaroid, the subject or the images, and the context that give personal value and added information to them. The way we are seeing the sum of the parts has much to do with the overall conceived ‘myth’ (Barthes; Mythologies) or McLuhanesque *massage*. But most importantly, matching the basic rules of documentative photography, it is the information given and received that brings the object, subject, and intended sentiment together.
Bibliography

http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/apr/05/polaroid-impossibleproject-instant-photography

The photographs in the appendix are all taken by Sheyma Buali.

Sheyma Buali recently gained her MA in Critical Media and Culture Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Currently she is a freelance writer for Middle East and London based publications and websites.

Contact: http://humanette.blogspot.com/