

Instant Dreams

My personal Polaroid story

June 2022

In 1976, I spent a year in the US. At first I lived in Bainbridge, Georgia, near the Florida border, with the parents of my girlfriend at that time, Wanda Wester. I later followed Wanda to Athens, where Wanda was studying art at the University of Georgia. I took a SAT test and also enrolled at UGA. Mass Media Philosophy was the name of the course I attended. It wasn't long before I got to know Professor James A. Herbert. Herbert is a painter, photographer and film-maker. His work is represented in many major American museums and collections, including Martin Scorsese's private art collection. Back then, he taught painting and film.

Herbert soon took me under his wing and offered me a room in his house on Dearing Street. I paid rent by painting the outside walls of his timber house.

We used to spend every evening on his veranda, which was legendary even then. As soon as dusk fell and temperatures dropped slightly, figures would appear in the big garden: the artist Silva Thin (Jeremy Ayers¹) just back from Andy Warhol's Factory in New York, the young Cindy Wilson (The B52s), Michael Stipe (R.E.M.²) and many other musicians, artists, film-makers and photographers. They all visited Herbert on his veranda. At my instigation, the exceptionally talented photographer Bonnie T. also joined the group. We discussed art and film ideas until way past midnight. Occasionally, Herbert would bring out a box of his old experimental photographs, including lots of Polaroids. I especially recall the intimate selfies of himself and his girlfriend Jackie Slayton. It's only now that I realize I was in Athens at exactly the right time. In the 1970s, ground-breaking developments were taking place here in music, art and film³.

Apart from my Nikon, I also had with me one of the first SX-70 cameras, which I had bought in Switzerland around two years previously. Herbert sometimes let me assist him with his experimental films. He had developed a special method. Using his Beaulieu 16mm movie camera, he shot very short sequences of his models and landscapes. The black and white material was then projected frame by frame onto white cardboard with a projector equipped with a hand crank. With the camera set up next to the projector, we filmed the slow-motion images that appeared on the cardboard. Beautiful, captivating impressions were created in this way⁴. Herbert's method inspired me to experiment with my Polaroids. Using slide projectors, I projected photos onto pre-exposed Polaroid film. The created effects produced mysterious, dreamy images which I called *diatypier*⁵. It was also on Herbert's veranda that I became acquainted with the British film-makers Andy Humphreys and Dick Perin. At the end of the year, the three of us drove across America to Los Angeles in an old van. Our journey

¹ As one of Andy Warhol's superstars under the pseudonym of Silva Thin, Jeremy Ayers (then known as Jerry) was active in the Warhol Factory scene in the 1970s. After returning to his native town of Athens, where Ayers' band Limbo District introduced an eccentric sound and vision, he traveled frequently between Athens and New York. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Ayers

² James Herbert also produced the music videos for R.E.M. and The B52's: <https://imvdb.com/n/james-herbert>

³ Roger Lyle Brown, PARTY OUT OF BOUNDS, The B-52's, R.E.M., and the Kids Who Rocked Athens, Georgia 2016, UGA Press, ISBN: 9-780-8203-5040-0.

⁴ James Herbert, STILLLS, 1992, Twin Palms Publishers, ISBN: 978-0-944092-19-4

⁵ diatypie.com is a trademark registered by Steff Gruber

also took us through northern Mexico, where our car was broken into in the border town of Juarez. Almost all of my Polaroid originals from my time in Athens were stolen, and so was my SX-70 camera. I was devastated.

In Los Angeles, we met the film producer Robert Evans⁶ in a bar. He invited us to Paramount Studios where he showed us sets from major Hollywood movies, which still existed at that time. Outsiders were strictly forbidden to take photos, but he handed me his SX-70 camera and with a twinkle in his eye, invited me to take photos "on his behalf". Not only did he let me keep the photos but he also gifted me the camera after I had told him the story about our car being broken into in Juarez. I still have and still use this camera today...

Two years later, I shot my first feature film MOON IN TAURUS on Herbert's veranda. Wanda, by this time my ex-girlfriend, played the lead role. Andy Humphreys came over from London especially to do the camerawork. We arranged to do auditions at the trendy restaurant T.K. Harty's Saloon. Polaroids of Cindy Wilson, Silva Thin, Theresa Randolph and many others were produced here⁷. Herbert and Jackie Slayton helped wherever they could. Bonnie T. was the set photographer (she also often used her 8x10 large-format camera for Polaroid peel-apart film). Not only did I learn everything you should know about analogue art photography from her; no, for some time, I also copied her style. I was especially taken with her pinhole methods. I also got to know Bonnie's own role model, Professor Wiley Sanderson (1918-2011). Sanderson was considered *the* pinhole photography expert and I took the opportunity to learn everything about the design of these unique cameras.

The *diatypien* that were produced using my method were exhibited for the first time in 1977 at the annual "Zürcher Künstler in den Züsphallen" exhibition. The renowned art critic Fritz Billeter referred to my pictures in a review in the Tages-Anzeiger newspaper at that time as "culinary".

For all of my movies, I used Polaroid photography for location finding and casting: I documented a research trip to Rome in 1982, together with my first cameraman Bubu (Rainer Klausmann), using only the SX camera. I had wanted to shoot the movie SMARA with Klaus Kinski, Mario Adorf and Peter Berling. The project was never realized, but I did have an unforgettable dinner with Peter Berling and Mario Adorf. During auditions for my third movie SECRET MOMENTS ten years later at Amsterdam's Club Roxy, an old art nouveau theatre, again dozens of Polaroids were taken.

I still use lots of these photos in my experiments today: "Remembrance of times passed." In the many decades I have worked with film and photography, I have met countless artists who have used the Polaroid method: first and foremost Andy Warhol, Wim Wenders, Andrei Tarkovsky, Balthus, David Hockney, Nobuyoshi Araki, Patty Smith, Alfred Watson and Stefanie Schneider, a German artist living in California. It's interesting to note that already in Jim Herbert's day, in the 1970s, the Polaroid camera was often used for intimate shots. I recall a discussion on that very subject on Herbert's veranda. Herbert was wondering about

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Evans

⁷ GIRLS ARE GIRLS & GUYS ARE GUYS, casting video by Steff Gruber, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFyAQKF_5Mc&t=3s

the reasons for this and suggested that the fact the images could be instantly seen (and if necessary destroyed) created a much more relaxed atmosphere between the model and photographer. In normal photography, the model didn't yet have this kind of control.

The Polaroid films I had been keeping in my fridge for decades were running low when I learned in 2008 that Florian Kaps from Austria was reviving the production of Polaroid film with his "Impossible Project". SX-70 films are now being produced again under the name POLAROID. The colors are no longer quite as vivid as the original film and unfortunately production of the Polaroid 100 (peel-apart film) has not been resumed. This film allowed the negative to be recovered, which meant that duplication was possible without the use of a scanner.

I'm experimenting with Polaroid again today, just as I did in the 1970s. I maltreat the originals using every conceivable method. I boil the pictures in water and other liquids, put them in the microwave, paint over them or I separate the layers in hot water and develop the *diatypien* method further. To post-process existing subjects, I also use the so-called Polaroid Lab. You transfer a photo to an iPhone, place the phone on the Polaroid Lab and create an SX-70 image. You can then scan and edit the photo, and if you want, expose it again with the Polaroid Lab onto analogue film. Analogue photography purists frown upon such digital detours. But I believe that in art everything should be allowed if it means we can see things in a new way.

Steff Gruber, Ciutadella, Menorca, June 2022

Illustrations:

- Polaroid, Silva Thin and Andy Warhol (Warhol Factory)
- Herbert and Jackie in the bathtub (Aperture)
- SX-70, Herbert and Jackie in Alice's Restaurant (Steff Gruber)
- Herbert at T.K. Harty's Saloon (Bonnie T / Steff Gruber)
- Example from STILLS by James Herbert (Twin Palms Publishers)
- SX-70, Cindy Wilson (Steff Gruber)
- 4/5 Polaroid, Wanda Wester and Steff Gruber (Bonnie T)
- SX-70, Portal Cinecitta, Rome (Steff Gruber)
- SX-70 hybrid, Judith van der Heuvel in SSECRET MOMENTS, Amsterdam (Steff Gruber)
- SX-70 hybrid, Helen in SSECRET MOMENTS, Amsterdam (Steff Gruber)