

ESSAY

Special Section: Fieldwork Confessionals

“Was it worth it?”

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FIGURE 1 Hy Meisel (1898–1985), Kodachrome slide, 1951. Courtesy of Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY. , scowling on the right side of the image, worked at Kodak, in the Camera Works factory. He was serious amateur and member of the Kodak Camera Club, and while this photograph formally echoes traditions of landscape portraiture, it also manifests something radically new, something made possible by Kodak. It is a self-representation. (Image provided by and courtesy of the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY)

Image description: At a quick glance, the figures could be teenagers in a human pyramid, or models, maybe, for Cezanne’s “The Bathers” or Manet’s “Luncheon on the Grass.” They’re all white, on a beach on an island in the Caribbean. A boy squints towards the camera; a woman in a white blouse smiles behind him; a man lounges in the center in the blue shirt; a woman in a swimsuit stretches her legs outstretched like an odalisque; Hy, the photographer, scowls behind them. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]



Founded in Rochester, New York, in 1880, Eastman Kodak went on to become the second-largest chemical company in the United States, and they are said to have made 80 percent of all the filmstock in existence. For over a century, the company saturated every aspect of American visual culture—from family albums to advertisements and Hollywood films to technologies of war and state surveillance. Mass-mediated images shot on Kodak film gave visual form to national fantasies, with their archetype subjects and landscapes, while consumer products invited ordinary people

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to image themselves within these collective fantasies (Figures 1–5). Considered as a chemical process, a corporate infrastructure, and a medium of the imagination, Kodak film potentiated a specifically American vision of the “good life” that achieved a global monopoly in the twentieth century and that remade the world on the levels of fantasy, image, and molecule. For generations, the company functioned locally as a “total institution” (Goffman, 1961) and precursor and proxy for the welfare state. It distributed benefits and resources through workers’ households and in the process made the nuclear family a sociological reality in Rochester. Workers were promised a paycheck for 30 years and a pension after that, and their children could also assume they would also find jobs at “Eastman’s.”

At one point, Kodak employed over 62,000 workers in Rochester, with another 60,000 around the world. But in 1983, it began a series of layoffs that precipitated the company’s bankruptcy in 2012. It emerged a year later as Kodak Alaris. The new Kodak employs only around a thousand workers, and that number is constantly dwindling. The new Kodak still occupies a corner of Kodak Park, the company’s oldest and largest chemical factory, and they still make film, though in small quantities and for niche cinematic markets.

Many former Kodakers lost benefits and pensions in the company’s restructuring plans, and they narrate the company’s decline as the betrayal of its promise to care for workers and their families. Many acknowledge that Kodak irreparably polluted the environment and exposed workers and factory neighbors to toxic substances. In jokes and whispers, they blame cancer and miscarriages on industrial pollution. Kodak was the nation’s top emitter of dioxin, “the most dangerous substance known to man,” and for years, the river abutting its factories was the most polluted in New York State. City residents know this. They could smell it in the air: a scent of burning plastic, at its worst on nights and weekends. Yet, many former employees continue to celebrate the company for having supported their families and for having manufactured the materials out of which American empire was built. They know that Kodak’s vision of the American Dream is toxic, but they remain attached to the wish that mass industrial production can bring about conditions of mass prosperity. It’s a most ordinary of contradictions, so often how love works (Berlant, 2008, 2011).



FIGURE 2 Artist unknown, Kodachrome slide, 1978. (Collection of author)

Image description: 1978. A woman on a green, corduroy sofa holds a toddler on her lap. The baby is smiling. She is obviously cooing, making faces to entertain him. She is Black—the baby is too—with light skin. Her hair is shiny, in a Dorothy Hamill haircut. Her nails are red, long, and perfect. There’s a thick strip of icy blue eyeliner on her upper lids. Her shirt, all earth tones, has at least three patterns in it. My guess, from the delight on her face and the pulled together-ness of her outfit, that she’s an aunt, not the baby’s mother. There’s newspaper on the arm of the sofa—it could be an armchair, too—but no matter how many times I rotate the slide, there is no angle on which we can read the name of their city. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

It was August 2015, and Ted and I were at a bar in the South Wedge. A colleague had introduced us. He's a Virgo, too, and has a PhD from Northwestern. His wife's an historian, his son is even a poet. I liked him and, I guess, had the sense that he knew what I was doing in Rochester.

"Someone¹ asked me again today if it was worth it," I told him. "The guy said, 'Given how much families have suffered'—he was talking about layoffs—'my friends and I ask each other, was it worth it?' And then he asked me, do I think Kodak was worth it? Like what does that even mean, 'worth it'? I said with scare quotes. 'I don't know what to say to that! Like, that's not my question! I'm asking how Kodak changed the world, not whether it was 'worth it.'"

"Well," Ted asked, "was it?"

"Was it what?" I asked.

"Was it worth it? What'd you tell him?"

"Oh! Umm, well, you mean like if you factored in the layoffs and the pollution?" The cost of extracting silver from the silver mines and the coal from the coal mines used to make film, the cost of cancer, the cost of remediating, the cost of not remediating, the cost of all the wastewater that flowed into the Genesee River (Genesee being the Seneca word for "beautiful valley"; this is Haudenosaunee land) and the waste that remains in the riverbanks. There is more silver there than anywhere else in the world, a scientist told me. "That stuff's collateral," I told Ted. "It doesn't get factored into the costs of capitalism. Maybe Kodak was worth it *and* not worth it." I held up my palms to pantomime the scales of justice, but how do you weigh the river in perpetuity against the family photograph? "Maybe it's both. Maybe both can be true at the same time." It felt impolite to be so close to someone else's conscience. I closed the notebook on the table in front of me and recapped my pen. "I guess that's not really the point of what I'm trying to do here. I'm more int—"

"Well, maybe it's not the point, but what do you think?" Ted pressed.

"You know, I don't know. I don't know if such a calculus is possible—to figure out if Kodak did more good than bad or bad than good in the world. To be honest, when people ask, I guess I say that the question can't be answered. Because Kodak shaped the world. It reshaped our eyes and how we see the world. We don't know a world without Kodak." I lowered my gaze to the beer in front me, peeling off, in the August humidity, its label in one piece. But Ted stayed quiet, so I kept going.

"There's this French philosopher I like, Felix Guattari? He has this cool book called *The Three Ecologies*, and in it, he talks about some scientist he saw on TV, on French TV, one time. This scientist, he has two tanks of water in front of him. One tank has dirty, polluted water from the port of Marseilles, and the other tank is full of 'pure, unpolluted,' 'normal' water, Guattari says. In the dirty water, there's an octopus, fresh from the sea. It's 'healthy, [it's] thriving, [it's] almost dancing,' Guattari says, but then, when the scientist takes the octopus out of the dirty sea water and pours it into the clean water, almost immediately, the octopus 'curled up, sank to the bottom and died' [Guattari 1989, 43]. It got so use to living in a toxic world, that the octopus couldn't live without the toxic. It couldn't turn back. That's us. We're the octopus. There's no going back. We live in this world," I said. This is the world-as-picture, the world Kodak as pictured it. "We can only judge it through, like, a Kodacolor prism, you know?"

"You know, actually, Ted, there is something I say sometimes. I give this, um, mishmash of lines from Rousseau, about how civilization was the downfall of everything and there's no going back, and how, at the same time, there are good things about the mess we're in. It's only here, in these limits, that we know the sweet parts of life. Family, love. This downfall gave us the capacity for love, 'the sweetest feelings known to man.' And that part's a quote," I said to Ted. "Friendship and family and romantic love, things that I want to hold onto, in one form or another." They might not add up to a "good life," but the sweet parts are still there. "And either way, there's no going back," I said. "We're photographic beings. We can't undouble the world, or undo how photography changed it."

"That's true," Ted said.

Thank, god, I thought.

"Family," Ted said. "We did things that mattered. We gave people the things, the materials, to remember their lives. When the house is on fire, what do you grab? You grab the photos." He rummaged through an invisible shoebox. "It was about helping people. It's how we know ourselves, through photographs. Birthdays, vacations—I just think about all the photos we took of the kids growing up. I remember, I was at my sister's once, and she had this whole bowl—an actual fishbowl on her kitchen counter, full of film she hadn't gotten developed yet. It wasn't cheap, if you remember, developing your film. I said, 'pff, give 'em to me. I'll take them to my friend in the Research Lab.' They weren't supposed to do it, but they would. For the Olympics, we'd have guys working double shifts making film." Kodak film was used for every promotional image, the photo finish of every race. "It was a service," Ted said. They'd have ceremonies. Guys would bring their wives, and the managers would give out pins to everyone who worked overtime."²

"I know it sounds cheesy, but we thought we were doing this for America. Now?" He exhaled audibly through circled lips. "I'm not so sure. Does anyone even want this? Do we know what people want anymore? We thought it was image quality, but we were wrong about that." At one point, Kodak determined desire; now they can't even find it. "People were fine with a low-res digital image for years. Digital is different! It's about sharing the images, moving the images. Now, it's like, come up with an app that might keep us afloat. They're still trying to figure out how to make Kodak go digital." Kodak secured a fantasy for nearly a century. What fantasy could secure us now? Ted, who had made it through almost 30 years of layoffs, was laid off a few months after our night in the beer garden.



FIGURE 3 Artist unknown, Kodachrome slide, 1962. (Collection of author)

Image description: 1962. The bride is in the center of the image, still wearing her veil, and the groom partially obscured by the centerpiece: tall, white lilies. The table is covered in white linen. They are white too, the couple and their guests. They are outside. The greenery behind them—sumac, I think—assumes a wildness in contrast to the tidy place settings, the women in hats on either side of the couple. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Was it worth it, gaining so much just to lose it? It's a question asked at the end of things, a question asked in heartbreak and impossible to answer. The I who asks is not the I who fell in love. "Was it worth it" made me want to hold the world together, even if the world in question had already crumbled. Instead of answering, I tried to scratch at it and put words to why it wouldn't hold.

To answer on its terms is to allow economic rationalization to determine the ethical. What is the value of life's labor against a legacy of mis-carriages and cancer clusters? Was the pension worth the health risks, worth the risk to others? Was the river in perpetuity a fair cost for a few generations of cheap abundance? Was it worth it? Rather than a "yes" or a "no," the question calls for a consideration of the affects and modes of attachment that mediate between present and past. The question wants relief from this tension, from an anxiogenic ambivalence that the querent is living out: toward the end of life at the end of a world, is it possible to look back with pride?

Is there a way to displace the question, to acknowledge the incommensurability of the categories? If we are able to tolerate ambivalence and hold both at once—the "enormous economic profits *and* enormous cultural and personal losses" (Jain, 2013, 223); the sweet parts *and* the fact that the "good life" required the poisoning of the world—these "contradiction[s]," S. Lochlann Jain writes, can become "not only legible, but livable and dieable" (223). Ambivalence opens the possibility for what Jain calls an elegiac politics: "a space where the material humanity of suffering and death informs communicative and collective action" (24).

Yet, as it is phrased, the question seems to demand certainty, and it hovers in a mood of regret. Like nostalgia, this mode of regret is a "romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym, 2007, 7). Its backwards gaze distracts the subject from acknowledging the complexity of attachment and the conditions of life in the present. But whereas nostalgia might seek a return to the past in order to do it all over again, regret contemplates to return in order to do it differently. But if regret could go back, could it choose any differently?

"Was it worth it?" wants the answer to be "yes." It individuates from history and asks the subject to bear the weight of structure, rather than allowing that agency might be distributed unevenly throughout it. The question hopes the will can save us, that we are sovereign, self-made subjects, nonporous and contained. It supposes that it would have been possible to desire otherwise, to extract oneself from the moment and milieu and to choose otherwise. With this proposition, "was it worth it" underestimates the extent to which our desires are shaped by the structures of feeling that recruit and conscript us. What if we couldn't have done it differently, at least not without giving up this world entirely? What if we read the story of Kodak not as one of heroic will, but as a tragedy in which will and necessity are bound in unfrayable knots? We are the octopus, after all, our sensorium shaped by environment.

"Was it worth it?" asks permission to remain attached to fantasy: the fantasy of the sovereign subject, the fantasy of the company that cared, the fantasy that it is possible to manipulate molecules into material abundance, endlessly and without harm. Kodak was supposed to have been the

more ethical option. They made photographs. It wasn't like working at Lockheed Martin, Boeing, or Exxon, all options for the chemists at Kodak. They made photographs.³

At the same time—especially in the way Ted asked it: rushed, whispered, urgent—"Was it worth it?" hints at a crack in the fantasy, a shadow of doubt. It's what made the question vulnerable. The querents knew the cost. If the answer was "no," they seemed to assume, they were either in part to blame for keeping the machinery going or they had been duped. If the latter, it would mean that it wasn't love after all. It was smoke and mirrors. The workers were workers, not kin. If the latter, it meant the end of the fantasy that once strung life together and provided its moral frame (Gornick, 2020 xv). The justifications for the hazards of chemical manufacturing would then evaporate, like the solvents (methylene chloride, mostly) that wafted off film base as it dried on giant steel casting wheels. It wasn't clear if every querent could sustain a "no."

To weigh whether Kodak was worth it is to presume that loss can be calculated and that the play itself is over. The question wants to believe that we will arrive at a moment in time when the balance can be tallied up and the answer will be knowable. The world that Kodak created may have ended, but we have yet to arrive at its Judgment Day. Chemical time keeps going. Just as photographs change over time—the molecules react to their environments and transform the appearance of the image; dies fade, paper yellows, and the edges lose their crispness—industrial debris will shape the conditions of life for generations. Solvents, cyanide, cadmium, barium, polychlorinated biphenyls, furons, photographic dyes, dioxin, mercury, nickel, substances that have no names, substances that no one outside of Kodak has ever seen before, substances that recombined with other substances and become something entirely new, and so much silver. The chemicals that Kodak poured into the river and air and soil are still there, in the landscape and the bodies of workers, factory neighbors, and their children. Cause and effect are nearly indissoluble and still ongoing.



FIGURE 4 Artist unknown, Ektachrome slide, 1978. (Collection of author)

Image description: 1976. Three women are shown from the chest up, in front of front steps covered in peeling, blue paint. They are Black. The one on the right has a bandanna on her head, the one in the center has a wide brim hat flipped up in the front, the one on the left smokes a cigarette, a yellow headband in her hair, gold earrings in her ears, a yellow top with a mock neck collar. They all wear sunglasses, and they all look exceedingly cool. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

If the play is still unfolding and the conclusion stays untidy, if we never reach the end and the costs and benefits can't be tallied up with final certainty, how do we reckon with the question "Was it worth it?"—let alone, that of accountability? How do we act from within tragedy?

Tragedy recognizes that we are subject to forces—fates, structures, desires that we did not initiate—set in motion before we entered the stage and that we ourselves are the consequence of. But what keeps tragedy chugging toward its fateful end is that the characters "go on doing the things which produced these consequences in the first place," Stanley Cavell (1976) writes. Tragedy is tragic, he argues, not because the outcome is inevitable but because the characters assume the inevitability of fate. They refuse to recognize the significance of their own actions and the depths of their own and others' suffering (318). The remedy to tragedy is not the backward glance of regret, "not rebirth, or salvation, but the courage, or plain prudence, to see and to stop" (309). It requires turning the gaze to the present and interrupting the ethical structure by which we measure the worth of a river by ingots of silver.

But there is a risk here. To propose an alternative measure of value would be to abandon the modes of accounting inherent to capitalist accumulation. Letting go of its logics would mean ending the world a second time over.

Perhaps, if loosened from the past and its grammatical form, "Was it worth it?" can be a starting point in the piecemeal work of working and thinking through these adjudications. The question begins from the presumption that the old world is over and, without stating it explicitly, recognizes the violent and ongoing regimes of extraction that sustained the industrial "good life" for a few generations. It invites self-reflection across multiple scales and can function, to borrow a phrase from Veena Das (2007), as a "gesture of mourning." It calls for a critical, almost anthropological, analysis of how the present came to be, as it attempts to unriddle cause and effect and grasp one's place in history. As Das suggests, taking stock of what has been lost and the sweet parts that remain is a condition of moving forward (77), a way to make contradiction livable.

When taken up in conversation, regret can be an attempt to remake meaning and maintain relations in the absence of the institution that once structured social life and desire.⁴ It opens the querent to the judgment of others, and it invites the other to participate in establishing an ethical ground that refuses to reproduce the capitalist sensibilities that led to the end of this world.

Was it worth it? Maybe the answer isn't "yes" or "no" but a recognition of sacrifice and the weight of ambivalence. Kodak was part of a terracidal order of industrial capitalism that poisoned the earth and our bodies and minds and, at the same time, it made this world a more beautiful place.

Was it worth it? Even if it weren't and wishing worked, it would be hard to wish this world away. It would mean wishing myself away, too. And besides, there's so much in it I want to hold on to.



FIGURE 5 Hymen Meisel (1898–1985), Kodachrome slide, 1948. Courtesy of Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY) Image description: A crowd huddles on the side of a hill for a photograph. A woman in the foreground bites into a hot dog, and behind them is the sort of picnic shelter you'd see in a public park. Hy's name and address are carefully printed on the paper border, but the red ink on a label has spread with age and blotted out some of the details. We can still make out "Dept 51. Picnic." Other than a Black woman in the middle row, the crowd is mostly white, at least according to contemporary conventions. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

ENDNOTES

¹ Italics signify that I am paraphrasing conversations with my interlocutors.

² The practice started during World War II, when the Department of Defense distributed "E-pins" to industrial workers.

³ Workers said this to me. They also spoke about avoiding service at Vietnam by working in certain positions at Kodak, but, beginning in World War I, the company produced military technologies and worked intimately with the US Department of Defense when George Eastman, the company's founder, established an aerial photography school in Rochester. During World War II, Kodak continued to produce imaging technologies for the state. They also managed nuclear enrichment facilities in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, produced military explosives at Eastman Chemical in Tennessee, and assembled proximity fuses for bombs. Weapons production at Eastman Chemical continued throughout the Cold War.

⁴ I am referring here to Kodak's near-monopoly as the medium of mass culture in the twentieth century.

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