

Thousand

An interview with Philip-Lorca diCorcia about Thousand, a project completed in 2007 that compiles 1,000 of his Polaroid photographs Conducted by Charlotte Cotton LACMA's Curator of Photography on February 14, 2008

Charlotte Cotton: Your Thousand project, recently published as a book and being exhibited for the first time as a gallery installation at LACMA, is an edit of exactly 1,000 Polaroids made by you. What was the concept, and when did you conceive it?

Philip-Lorca diCorcia: I think that the idea of 1,000 was the most primary: the fact that this was, when I conceived the project, a big number in photographic terms. It also came about before the juggernaut of digital photography got rolling and 1,000 became an easy number given that we speak in terms of computer memory rather than a roll or sheet of film. I kind of liked the absurdity of that analog amount.

CC: What do you consider the qualities of Polaroids to be? What are the associations for you? Is it about their preciousness and small size?

P-L diC: Well, they only become precious if you save them!

One of their other characteristics is that they are instantaneous, and you can make your mind up whether to keep one of them, there and then. One aspect of film-based photography is that you end up with a lot of stuff that is extraneous in order to get what you want. In the case of Polaroids, it isn't like that. You really can make a snap decision, and I think that this particular quality of Polaroid as an analog process has been forgotten because of the rise of digital. But when I started collecting the Polaroids, that was not the case: they were the most instantaneous, easily rejected, form of photography.

CC: Was there a clear method to what you saved and what you immediately discarded from the Polaroids you took?

P-L diC: Part of what creates the curiosity of the project is that the process was so simple it kind of became invisible. And I think that's disconcerting. People want to see the rhyme behind the reason, or the reason behind the rhyme. The choices were often made for purely sentimental reasons. I don't appear in any other body of work I have made, and in Thousand, I appear a lot, as do my son and my ex-wife and other people who have been in my life. They might appear more frequently than they represent chunks of my life—there is no relationship between how many times someone appears in the thousand and their importance in my life, but there is a relationship between what they mean in my life and the fact that I decided to keep their Polaroid. And that's just the people part.

CC: There are other reasons for the Polaroids aside from documenting yourself and your loved ones?

P-L diC: People seem especially interested in the Polaroids that were taken before and after some of my better-known photographs. They are not meant to be a guidebook to process, but people are curious about that kind of thing. That process of recognition is definitely part of the experience of the Polaroids project.

CC: What was the editing process for the book project, Thousand?

P-L diC: There were two parts of the process: the selecting of the thousand or so Polaroids to work with, and then the sequencing of exactly 1,000. Initially, that ordering was intended to be randomly generated. This was announced before the book was actually done. But in the end, it didn't happen that way. I felt that if I couldn't sequence randomly and stick to it, I should not stick to it at all, which is eventually what happened.

CC: So you have one section of the Polaroids that was made as part of your working process—to test out light and composition, etc.; and then you have another section of Polaroids that represents you and your loved ones. Are there other categories? For instance, the landscapes in the book; they were a surprise for me.

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA'S 'A DOZEN POLAROID' PROJECT

P-L diC: A Polaroid is not very big. The reason for the landscapes is often because of the fact that there is a reduction of vastness into a small image. Does that concentrate or dissipate the image? I was seeing what happens. In the case of the Polaroid, the fact of miniaturizing feeds into the reason for keeping them. Their disposability and lack of grandeur become factors—the very fact that you keep them is important, and they become precious because of it. I mean, what purpose do they serve? That alone is a reason to keep them, and a way for me to incorporate how I think photographically without being ironic.

CC: There are Polaroids of clock faces that appear repeatedly in the sequence of Thousand, what do they mean?

P-L diC: If you don't look at them too closely, they act like it's always the same time, always the same feeling. Because of the way the clock faces are rendered, they also are about the passage of time, and that seemed to be a good reason to use them as a device, as a chapter heading in the sequence of Polaroids in the book. It may have been a convenience when I was trying to make sense of the thousand Polaroids. It was a fortuitous convenience, but in the end, I like the way they look.

CC: So we have landscapes, still lifes, people you know, Polaroids connected to your working process. What else?

P-L diC: Well, I used different cameras, including the camera that produces two images. With it, before you can develop the Polaroid, you have to take two separate images, which leads to an obvious temptation to make two images that relate to each other. And there

are double exposures, which are very easy to do with the cameras I used because you don't have to advance the film, just cock the shutter again. Both of these devices produce two images that play off each other. There are about twenty photographs in the sequence that are made as double or double-exposure images.

CC: That seems rather gimmicky for you.

P-L diC: That's one of the things about producing so many images: you wind up leveling them all—the ones that might be considered precious are no more or less important than the ones that embarrass me.

CC: I remember the first time you mentioned the Polaroids to me, a couple of years back, and it surprised me, because I think of you as someone who doesn't actually take that many photographs. There is a high degree of deliberation and production to the work that you are known for, and it's not a kind of practice that has a regular routine to it. So, in terms of making the Polaroids, do you make them every day? How often and with what mind-set do they happen?

P-L diC: I've now stopped myself from making Polaroids. This project was conceived years ago, which means that idea affected how I was working a long while ago. It didn't really have a form, but there was a point when I realized that I was saving Polaroids for something, and that something changed when I became conscious of what I was doing. There was a time when I was making grids of the composites, just to see what would happen. They were too

visually poetic, so I threw them back into the boxes with the other Polaroids, and it's only now that they are kind of put back together.

CC: Do you think of Polaroids as having a poetic aesthetic, or an aesthetic at all?

P-L diC: In the sense that they have a suspended conclusion, yes. There is nothing absolutely definitive about good poetry that seems to allude to things on a nonliteral level. And there is something about the Polaroids when seen together that does the same thing. I don't think they have that quality individually, but it's one of the consequences of putting them together. They have a kind of suspended significance that is frustrating if you want to see an image in service to something, because I'm not sure that's what you get with Thousand.

CC: What did it feel like to edit these pictures? Because you have emotional ties to the subjects of many of the images, was it a very different process of editing than it was for creating your known bodies of work?

P-L diC: The only other project that I edited in a parallel way was A Story Book Life, which seems to have ostensible similarities, and why I took so long to commit to Thousand. There are obvious connections being made between the Polaroids: Polaroids of the same person may be grouped together, and then there are basic formal groupings of circles and squares. You notice such things when the images are rendered small. I did not sit in a room with 1,000 Polaroids and sequence them. They were scanned in groups and came back to me printed on sheets in a reduced size, and that

was when I noticed the visual connections between images. You couldn't see the content of the images at that small size, but the formal patterns jumped out.

I did not choose the order in which they were scanned, and I began to think that this was an ordering that related to the way our minds work, that the connections between things are not necessarily led by our conscious mind, and there are other ways in which we order things. Without consciously ordering them, it made a lot of sense, and I used it as a formal device to begin to put Thousand together.

CC: For this exhibition, we are showing the original 1,000 Polaroids. What do you think will happen?

P-L diC: I don't know what you mean by *happen*. The question is, *Who will it happen to?* The audience is not something that I can plan, but I assume a certain degree of sophistication, not an imagined audience that responds to the work with, "My child could do this."

Part of the promise and the curse of photography is its accessibility, and I think that one aspect of doing a project like this in the context of the contemporary art world is to raise and question the idea of authorship. We live in a world where many artists don't make their own work, and much of it is incredibly labor-intensive and impressive, in terms of its production. With Thousand, it doesn't take that much to make, they are not that expensive, they are not that big, they are not going to last forever, and the artist actually made them himself.

I wonder what the reaction is going to be, because so much art today is meant to overwhelm, and the Polaroids are, by definition, underwhelming.

CC: One of the reasons that you are a celebrated, feted contemporary artist is that your bodies of work such as Hustlers and Heads do have really strong authorship. I mean this in the sense that in this world, where photography is often seen as a medium that is terribly easy to use, what you get with your work is complex—whether all of it, some of it, or none of it is premeditated. Your authorship does not exclusively revolve around style or production values but with your ability to distill and reveal the sublimated forces and poetry that run through real lives. With the Polaroids, there is very little assurance in the individual frames that you are governing, perhaps authoring, the degree of profundity a viewer might experience.

P-L diC: When I say that there are no heroes in Thousand, I have to say that it appears from the responses that I am getting that everyone has their favorites. It's expansive enough for everyone to have multiple points of view. Part of what I normally do is restrict what people are allowed to see and assume, without forcing through an obvious conclusion. It's not a reduction of options but an opportunity. One of the strange aspects of working with so many images is that this quality remains.

I don't think Thousand is that different from other bodies of my work. I'm not telling people what to think; it's still allowing people to draw their own conclusions.