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The Demise of an Art Medium

"They took all the trees
Put 'em in a tree museum
And they charged the people
A dollar and a half just to see them

Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone"

—Lyrics from "Big Yellow Taxi" by Joni Mitchell

Joni sure saw it coming! Then there's Adam Gopnik, who pleads with Mayor Bloomberg to take action to preserve New York's identity, it's *soul*, before it disappears, in an essay on urban development in the January 8 *New Yorker*. Closer to home, in the realm of photography, Kenneth Baker, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, recently spelled out the irreversible course of conventional photography in his tribute to the late photographer Ruth Bernhard. He writes, "The history of photography has evolved in directions no one could have imagined . . . as the range of available films and photographic printing paper continues to shrink." As once familiar materials vanish in favor of more modern ones, the disposition of the market shifts, and the earlier context of use is lost.

The making of traditional chemical photographs is coming to an end as it is continuously superseded by newer digital technologies. If you can't quite comprehend the finality of this, just try purchasing a plain, old-fashioned camera, film, or photographic paper.

For all of us invested in the medium of photography, the magnitude of the change is equivalent to a language or a species dying, in part because of a widespread lack of documentation of photographic materials and processes. The primary manufacturers of photographic papers, films, and chemicals—Agfa, Kodak, et al.—did not consistently save batch samples of their products, and photographers who have experimented with various techniques and materials by and large didn't keep dark-room studio records. As a result, we don't know what we have, how long it will last, or necessarily how to care for it.

In an effort to stem the complete loss of more than 168 years' worth of material history, the Boston-based conservator Paul Messier and the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) are both scrambling to build comprehensive photographic-reference collections. The two projects—one private, the other public—are analogous in scope and purpose to the Svalbard International Seed Bank, an agricultural seed depository being assembled in



Handbook, *Photography at Home: The Use of the Camera in the Home for Pleasure and Profit; With Working Methods and Reliable Formulae*. New York: Tennant and Ward, 1911. Courtesy Amanda Doentiz

a vault in a frozen Norwegian mountainside to protect the world's food sources in the event of a catastrophic disaster.

Messier is best known for his investigative research and authentication in 1999 of the fake Lewis Hine photographs that were constantly on the market selling as rare, vintage prints for huge sums of money. Together with private collector Michael Mattis, who had bought some of the expensive fakes, Messier devised an

empirical method for determining the dating of twentieth-century photographic papers. Where conservators had once relied on tests for optical brighteners and paper fibers to date vintage works, Messier recognized the need for a reference library of photographic materials. He got a head start on the GCI and currently has the largest private holding of dated photographic papers—3,500 samples, identified by manufacturer, brand, and sur-

