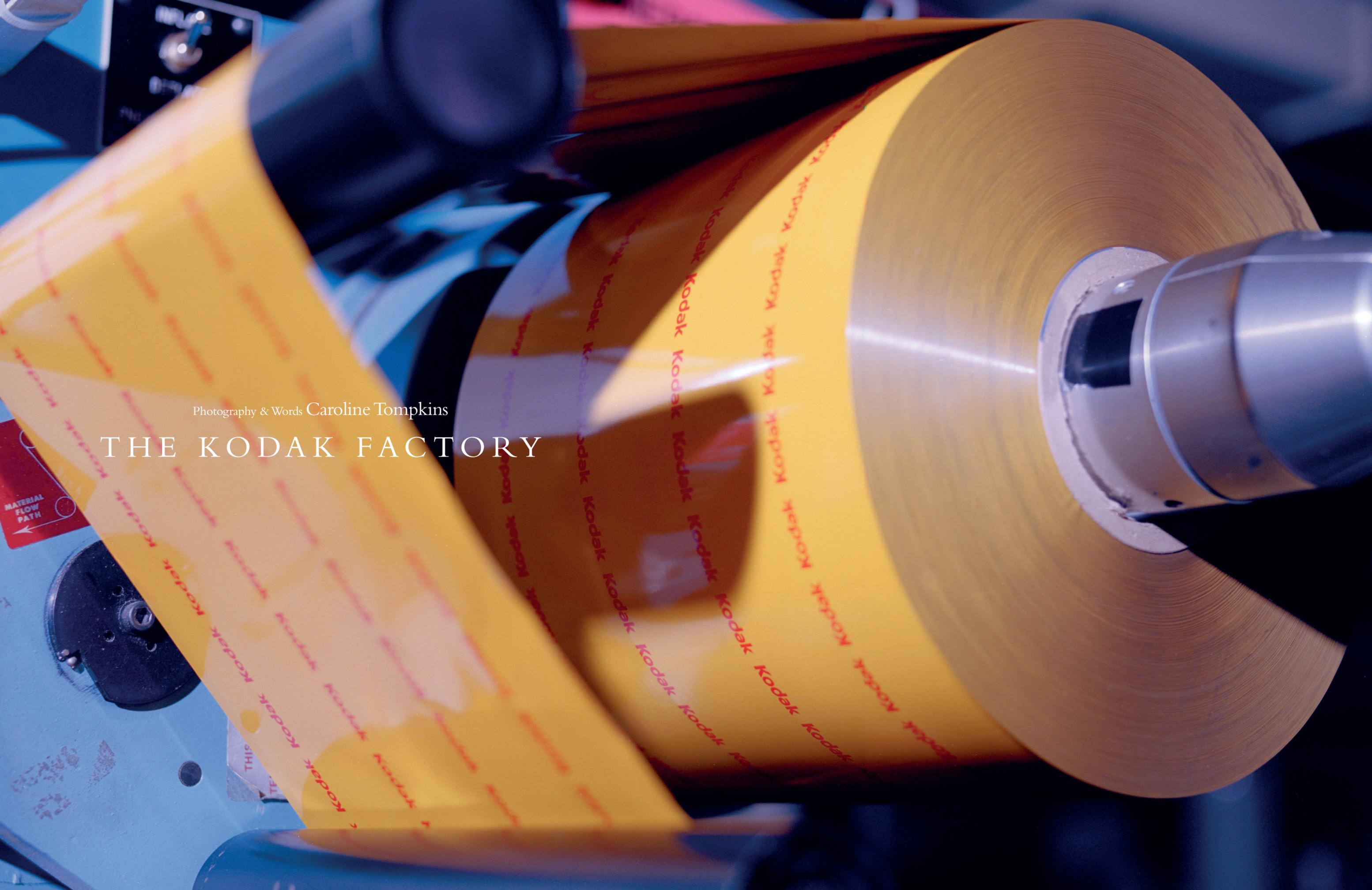


Photography & Words Caroline Tompkins

THE KODAK FACTORY



MATERIAL FLOW PATH

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“You were good if you worked at Kodak,” the hotel driver says to me as he swerves through the 1 a.m. Rochester stillness. “You could go into any one of these car dealerships, tell them you work for Kodak, and they’d give you any car on the lot.” He talks about the company like an estranged ex-wife – she’s not dead, but she’s *changed*.

It’s 7 a.m., and I’m burning a make-your-own waffle in the Quality Inn breakfast lobby. Unlike New York City, there’s space here. Silence. Carpet that feels permanently wet. Diane, a product manager at Kodak, is texting me that she’s outside ready to pick me up. I want to make a joke that it feels like she’s picking up her waffle-scented kid the morning after sleeping at a friend’s house, but I don’t because that wouldn’t be good for either of us.

Rochester looks like its pictures. Practically monochromatic, the city exhales clouds of rust. Diane, like a wind-up toy, only allows me to speak while she’s catching her breath. She’s the survivor telling everyone it’s safe to come back to the island – a different island. Trained as a chemist, she compares film vs digital to apples and oranges. “The dye clouds!” she remarks. “The dye clouds make each piece of film a beautiful snowflake.” It’s not a competition; it’s cohabitation.

We get to the security gate of Eastman Business Park where she jokes about the guard’s absence of urgency. Tragedy plus time plus Diane’s will to be amused makes this all funny now. I like Diane. I laugh with her, nervously, unsure if I’m allowed.

“We’re still a city within a city. We’re just not the mayor anymore,” she announces. The Eastman Business Park has all the energy of something left behind, which is more a testament to the nature of business parks than is it to the state of Kodak. What was once the largest photographic product manufacturer in the world, has now been cut up, sold off, leased out, and liquefied. The park’s medical marijuana facility threads a smell of weed through the streets and tech bros bustle around like an invisible current – a different island.

After entering each new building Diane repeats “Cleanliness is godliness!” which requires a brief stomping on a wet mat. She adds, “Kodak is a chemical company after all,” and takes me to meet Jeff, a man who is affable, but unsure of my intentions. To them, I’m the press, another somber story about the fall of Kodak. I shoot with a Mamiya RZ because it makes people like him trust me.

Jeff, the Product & Development Engineering Supervisor, has everything to tell me about the how, the why, the future. We’re standing in a Kodak-yellow room filled with machine parts, bags of gelatin, and pieces of film strewn about fold-out tables where he walks me through the process of sensitising the film. I’m so impressed with his affection for the subject that I just nod and smile and retain few details. He tells me that 80 percent of Kodak’s business is in printed circuit boards, which is the board base in most electronics, and how that props up and subsidises the film business. (Thank you PCB.) He tells me about the logistical nightmares of getting 600 chemicals of a film all together at the same time, with some raw materials requiring a six months lead time. He tells me, ‘film is sensitive to everything’. An employee who uses Selsun Blue shampoo affects the film differently than someone who uses Head & Shoulders. “With all the things that

could go wrong, it’s amazing that we get a picture,” he says, unaware of his profundity.

Jeff skirts around money talk – specifically if Kodak would ever compromise the quality of the film in the interest of cost. “The history of Kodak is the history of being very cautious,” Jeff says, referring to the years-long tests and trials they’ve been doing to bring the Ektachrome back. Besides, he’s more occupied with the source of supplies changing. He picks up a trash bag and squeezes it between his hands. If the trash bag company changes a component of their product, its altered photosensitivity might require Kodak to go looking for another supplier. A downsized Kodak downsizes their authority.

We leave the yellow room, suit up, and go into what I can only describe as what I think the industrial revolution looked like if the industrial revolution was lit by the director of the movie *Drive*. Part pure manufacturing, part green, yellow, and blue-gelled rooms, the beauty lies in what you can’t see.

Hush. Hmmm. Patter. Patter.

I make several *X-Files* jokes that don’t land. We pass other employees, who comment on my camera and the film inside, “As long as it’s got that big K on it,” and others who equate their legacy with the company as having “yellow blood”. I’m not sure if people are happy to see me or they’re just happy. No snarky comments about an unseen boss. No small asides about the company’s instability. Just passing fantasy football bets. Cake for an anniversary on six.

Diane takes me to meet Tom, the Supervisor in the Film Finishing Division, to show me how the film is finished. She calls him Mr. Kodak. I surprise myself with the exhilaration I feel as rolls of 120 are fed through a manufacturing-style Rube Goldberg machine. There, they are sorted, packaged, and tumble down into a pool of others. “My film!” I shout, feeling silly for feeling emotional. Tom tells me that Kodak is looking for applications for what they’re already good at. Perhaps new data storage regulations will require hard copies, and Tom sees film as a viable solution. If the 2012 bankruptcy was the pruning of the tree, 2018 is the regrowth.

Tom exits and I’m passed off to Jonathan, a Customer Service Specialist, to drive around the park and run out the clock. He shows me the Kodak fire station, boardroom, theatre, gymnasium, pointing at what was and what is now. I ask him about morale, but he assures me that people are either used to the volatility or comforted by Kodak’s new hirings. Everyone here is so ready to tell me *what happened*, and how now they’re doing *just fine*.

Diane offers to drive me to the airport. She tells me that she’s been trying to think of what has the correlative chemical complexity of film. Not cars nor computers, and definitely not digital – but only the human body, with its fluctuations, fickleness, sensitivities. I’m still thinking of the few, indebted, employees inside, “I never get to meet the people who use what I make.” I reply, “We’re in a symbiotic relationship.”

