

Photo-Industry in Meltedown

On precisely the same day that Europe's biggest annual imaging show opened in Birmingham, UK, the world's biggest annual imaging show opened in Orlando, Florida, USA. The day in question was 26 February 2006.

Who was responsible for this little gem of synchronicity I'm not sure, but for me, around thirty journalists from other UK magazines including *Amateur Photographer*; and companies such as Canon, there was no contest.

The choice had to be *PMA* and this meant missing *Focus on Imaging*.

The *Photo Marketing Association International* show is big. It is also the annual event at which many of the world's photographic companies hold their worldwide corporate meetings.

Of course many of the *Focus on Imaging* attendees – those 'anoraks' pacing the aisles with big DSLRs dangling from their necks in the hope of finding some scantily clad models to snap – would never attend *PMA*.

The two shows are not only a continent apart but poles apart.

Focus on Imaging is a jamboree which welcomes enthusiasts. *PMA* is strictly for those in the serious business of selling anything in imaging.

The good news is that this conflict of dates will not happen in 2007. *Focus on Imaging* is set for 25–28 February and *PMA* will be in Las Vegas 8–11 March. So, in 2007, we will be able to attend both. If there still is a photo-industry?

The biggest news that drifted over to *PMA* from *Focus* was that B&H Photo was there, dishing out their catalogues.

B&H Photo is a big New York retail store with just about the biggest stock of everything photographic that I have ever seen. Its presence in the UK must be an ominous sign for UK dealers and a clear sign that markets have now opened up globally.

Not only is it possible to order on-line from www.bhphotovideo.com but it can cost less than one third as much to telephone an order to B&H in New York as it does to telephone a UK company which uses an 0870 number.

Many companies actually receive a cut of what we pay for the phone call. UK companies which quote only 0870 numbers do not deserve our custom.

There is always an alternative to an 0870 number. If a company will not give you that number, or if you cannot find it at www.saynoto0870.co.uk, I suggest you make a point of taking your business elsewhere on principle.

0870 numbers are yet another example of 'rip off Britain'. No wonder the Americans are moving in.

Like so many US companies, B&H have an 800 freephone number for callers within the US. Freefone is a good indication of how much American companies value custom.

Over at *PMA* there were signs that the days of the photo-industry we know and love are numbered.

Walking into the show on opening

day Fuji was on the left, as usual, Kodak straight ahead and Canon on the right.

But where were Agfa, Konica-Minolta and Polaroid – all here last year? All these historic names – some of them part of the photo-industry since its earliest days – have gone.

Polaroid's booth position – earned over many years of loyalty – was now occupied by Pentax. Agfa's position was taken over by Olympus. Konica-Minolta were a late withdrawal from the show, so the space might have been empty had it not been for some imaginative thinking by the *PMA* staff.

They used the area for 'The Complete Picture Inspiration Center', a 'showcase of hands-on lifestyle experiences,' to help retailers style their stores for 'Jennifer' – a token US 'Gen X Mom'.

I never saw this exhibit crowded, though it did ensure that this prominent space – just to the left of Kodak – wasn't left empty.

All these major casualties of the photo-industry as we have known it used to be positioned around the main avenue, right opposite the entrance. Looking around, one couldn't help wondering which of the remaining major names in photography will be the next to go.

The grass was not as green as it used to be at Fujifilm – almost literally.

I couldn't help noticing that the carpet – usually that vivid green which hurts the eyes – had been toned down somewhat. A welcome change.

The grass may not be so green for



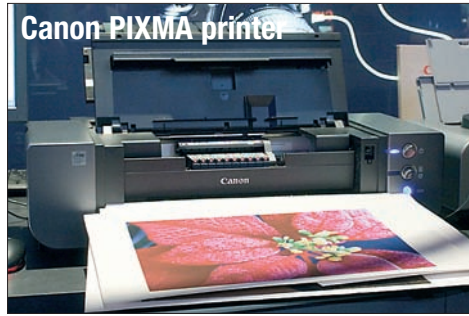
Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, Florida



Konica-Minolta's cancelled booth was not wasted



Canon SED Flat Screen CRT



Canon PIXMA printer



HP Photosmart Pro B9180 printer



Olympus Evolt E-330

SOME SIGHTS OF PMA2006

TOP LEFT: Note the shuttle bus – a mobile advert for Nikon. TOP RIGHT: Konica-Minolta's late cancellation did not result in empty space. PMA joined with a number of industry sponsors to present 'The Complete Picture Inspiration Center', a 'showcase of hands-on lifestyle experiences'. ABOVE: A new display technology could bring Canon into the world of TV manufacture. New professional printers from Canon and HP are set to challenge the dominance of Epson in this field. LEFT: The Olympus Evolt E-330 is an interchangeable lens DSLR with live preview. BELOW: Fuji's 'grass' – aka carpet – was not so vivid a green as before. Electronics companies are getting behind some of the major camera and optical companies.



The grass was not so green at Fuji



Olympus – pairing with Sony?



Samsung are right behind Pentax

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Fuji in other ways, for it has reduced drastically its film sales forecast for 2006.

Despite this, there was absolutely no sign of film dying at Fuji. There was even a new T64 Professional tungsten balanced ISO64 reversal film, available in various roll and sheet sizes.

In fact, it seems to me that Fuji is taking on all the major rearward actions in defence of silver-halide.

The loss of Agfa and Konica must be good news for Fuji and Kodak, for in a rapidly shrinking silver halide market there is now less competition.

But if the remaining players take undue advantage of this situation it could further accelerate the already landslide move to digital.

Kodak's booth consisted largely of meeting rooms, with a rather small display area to the front. Kodak is still number one in consumer digital cameras in the US and these took up a large part of its display. It is also very big in Kiosks.

In fact the whole of PMA was big in Kiosks – they seemed to be absolutely everywhere. Kiosks have now become so ubiquitous that they have been accorded a personality of their own – by no less an organisation than the Photoimaging Manufacturers & Distributors Association (PMDA). This year, PMDA's 'Person of the Year' award was presented to ... wait for it ... the Photo Kiosk!

Well, I suppose the Kiosk may now be the nearest thing to a human being that customers meet when they go into a minilab. In fact the Kiosk is considered so important there was a conference session devoted to building your own DIY Kiosk.

What exactly is a Kiosk? Basically it's

a computer with a touch screen, a few input and output peripherals and a fancy box to keep it all, together.

The ensemble is usually adorned with some bright and colourful graphics.

It certainly doesn't require the kind of advanced technology needed to make a CCD sensor or state-of-the-art DSLR.

All this leaves me wondering what exactly do they make in Rochester NY these days? Not a lot, if the accounts of Kodak Park resembling a ghost town are anything to go by.

I do worry about the future of the biggest name in the photo-industry.

Its best chance is to use the revenue from its film cash cow while it can, to acquire other companies which might make it big in the new field.

Its only future – and that of other chemical works like it – is to become an electronics company.

The problem is that there are too many well-established electronics companies already out there, waiting to take over imaging from the 'chemists'.

Sony has announced its DSLR, for release later this year, and rumour has it that this will owe much to Konica-Minolta, at least in terms of the IP (Intellectual Property) it embodies.

Panasonic hasn't actually said so but its first DSLR seems to be largely Olympus.

Samsung's new DSLR is mostly Pentax, as a result of the joint agreement made last autumn.

In the future, live LCD viewing of the image being composed will be the norm on DSLRs. Body design will no longer pay homage to film SLRs from 50 years ago.

They will then become true products

of the twenty-first century.

The electronics companies from the far east clearly do value tradition, though, for they are all using 'German' optics – Leica, Schneider and Zeiss. However, the nearest these lenses have been to Germany is probably Vietnam.

There's no work here for the skilled German lens grinders and polishers but it does serve to illustrate the importance of 'image' and 'name' which these new companies on the block attach to our old photo-industry names.

Panasonic (Matsushita), Samsung and Sony are all big names in consumer electronics. Among other things, they make television sets. They have experience in consumer digital cameras but not – as yet – in DSLRs.

All that will change.

One well-known company from the film days, but also big in consumer electronics, is Canon.

Canon showed a superb flat screen cathode ray display at PMA which could be used in a television set. It also has state-of-the-art digital projectors.

Canon is ideally positioned for the future of imaging.

Every day there are fewer specialist photo stores. Consumer electronics is devouring photography. Cameras are now computer input devices. There are persistent rumours about PMA combining with CES (*Consumer Electronics Show*) in the future.

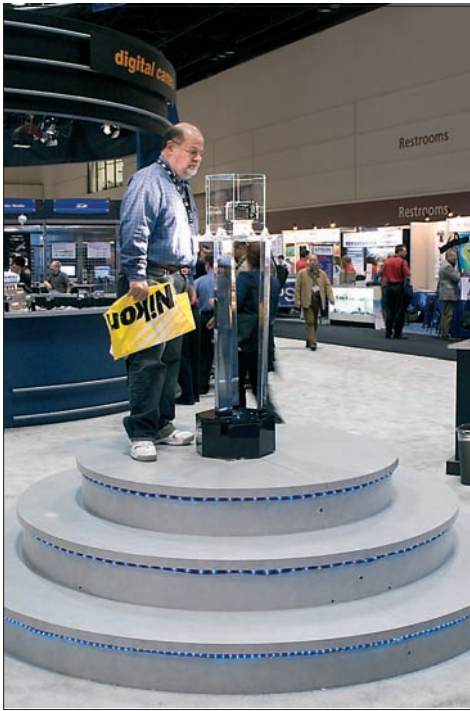
Although we have seen huge changes in photography, the biggest changes are undoubtedly still to come. The photo-industry we have known is indeed very close to meltdown.



Sigma's 105mm f/2.8 Macro, 18-50 f/2.8, 30mm f/1.4 (on camera), 150mm f/2.8 Macro and 50-500mm f/4-6.3

ABOVE: Gerry Magee, once a key member of the professional DSLR group at Kodak, has transferred his talents to this highly featured prosumer camera. LEFT: Electronics companies do not really understand lenses, so this means rich opportunities for the independent lens manufacturers. Sigma announced no fewer than five new lenses for the FT (Four Thirds) DSLR format at the PMA2006 show in Orlando.

John Henshall's Chip Shop is available online at
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**DMC-L1
Digital SLR Camera**

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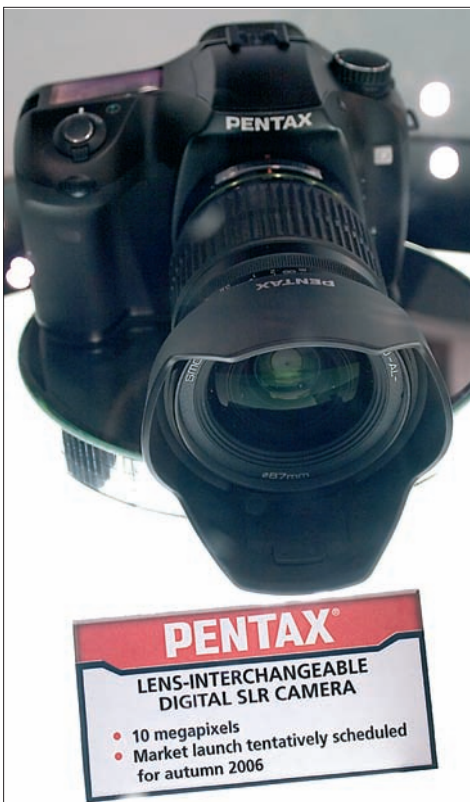
CAMERAS OF THE FUTURE

The DSLR cameras on this page were all shown under glass at PMA 2006. The Panasonic DMC-L1 (TOP ROW) will have a '4/3' format sensor and 'Leica' lens. The Samsung Pro 815 (LEFT) will have a 'Schneider' Varioplan 15x zoom having a 35mm film equivalent focal length range of 28 to 420mm. Pentax (BELOW) had two transparent bubbles – one containing a DSLR with a 'lens-interchangeable' 10 megapixel sensor, the other with a medium format '645 digital' ('tentative name') DSLR with an 18 megapixel sensor. None of these cameras were shown working at PMA but – along with others – all are expected to make their appearance later in 2006. One way or another, Photokina promises to be the show not to be missed.



Pro 815

- The world's longest built in 15X zoom - 28mm wide-angle and 15X ultra-high zoom capability (35mm film equivalent f=28-420mm)
- 3.5" TFT LCD with 230K pixels for great detail
- The world's largest-capacity lithium-ion battery (7.4Ah, 1000mAh)
- Various convenient display modes
- A fast response time (Blending 1.2 frame; Shot-to-shot 1.3 sec.)
- Video recording in VGA with stereo sound
- Advanced manual photography features



PENTAX
LENS-INTERCHANGEABLE
DIGITAL SLR CAMERA

- 10 megapixels
- Market launch tentatively scheduled for autumn 2006



PENTAX
PENTAX 645 DIGITAL
(Tentative Name)

- 18 megapixels
- Under development for 2006 market launch