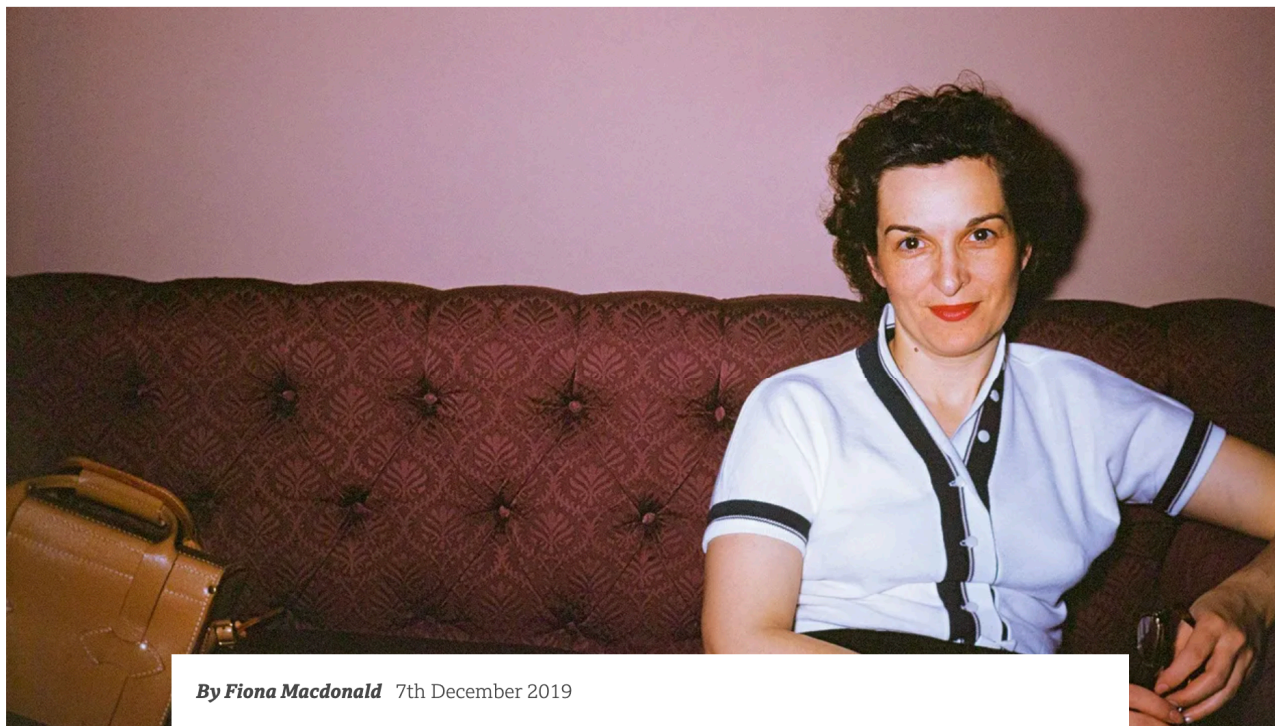


PHOTOGRAPHY

Anonymous Project: A secret history hiding in plain sight



(Image credit: The Anonymous Project)



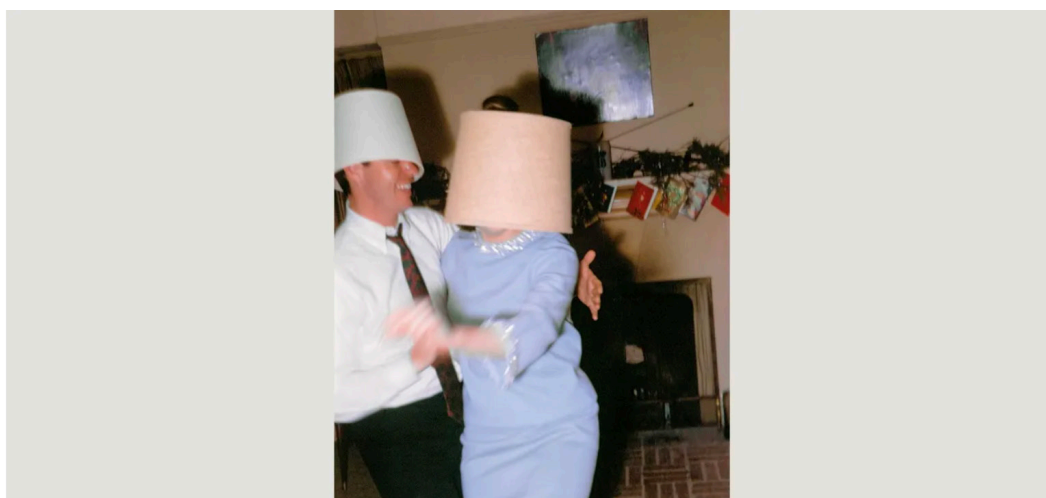
By **Fiona Macdonald** 7th December 2019

A project collecting together thousands of photos from flea markets and auction sites offers touching glimpses into strangers' lives, writes Fiona Macdonald.

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A baby is sipping at a pint of what looks like Guinness. Children on impossibly green lawns play-fight or pose on bicycles too big for them. Ice cream is consumed messily; funny faces pulled; shoulders straightened. A couple sit on a Technicolor patch of grass, a wire fence separating them from a beach. In swimwear and with smooth tans, they bask in the glow of their post-war affluence.

Are they living the American Dream? Were colours brighter then? The images – part of a collection of colour film slides called **The Anonymous Project**, and now published in a Taschen book, **Midcentury Memories**, raise more questions than they answer.



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

Found in flea markets or online auction sites in the US and the UK, these photos of intimate moments and family gatherings from the 1940s to the 1980s are removed from their context. We don't know the names of the people shown, or the places they inhabit. Yet that doesn't stop us making our own connections.

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"I realised that once you take away the details... a lot of people see themselves in the images," says Lee Shulman, the founder of The Anonymous Project, which since January 2017 has accrued 800,000 slides – making it what's believed to be the largest collection of its kind in the world. "We can relate to them more once you remove that information."



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

Colour is a large part of that relatability. Just as colourisation is bringing historical photos to life, the images collected here take us directly into the lives of strangers. "Colour photography brings you closer to the subject, it breaks down a barrier," Shulman tells BBC Culture. "I wanted people to project themselves into the images and think 'that could have been me'. Some of the images are from the 1940s – they're extraordinary."



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

Many of the slides were taken on Kodachrome, a film first introduced in 1935. “It’s strange to think colour photography was that early on – it was really ahead of its time,” says Shulman. “The images are quite old but the quality of them is so beautiful, modern in some respects, that the timing of them gets lost.”



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

In the foreword of *Midcentury Memories*, Richard B Woodward writes: “The Anonymous Project is singular for what it reveals about how we have chosen to portray ourselves across years and cultures – a secret history... that has been lying in plain sight for 75 years.” By rescuing thousands of slides from the oblivion of the attic or the garage, the collection “has liberated these fragments of history from their consigned darkness, and the tyranny of the linear slide show, allowing the rituals of family outings in the 1950s and ‘60s to stimulate our imaginations, much as Proust’s was by medieval legends”.



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

The project has allowed these images to be saved: while the technology was cutting-edge when it first came out, the chemicals used to create the slides faded over time. As Woodward writes: “The technology that created and animated these images is now defunct. Kodachrome 64 film was discontinued in 2009. The last Kodak slide projector was manufactured in 2004... orphaned memories are being salvaged here as well.”





(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

In some ways, Shulman believes he is preserving a record of shared human experience. “When I look at these images – I’m a father now – I see exactly the same instances of life today as it was then. I think there’s a common collective memory that is beautiful,” he says. “We all have family stories and family issues in everyone’s family, but we are part of a larger family – and that’s something that stands out for me in the project.”

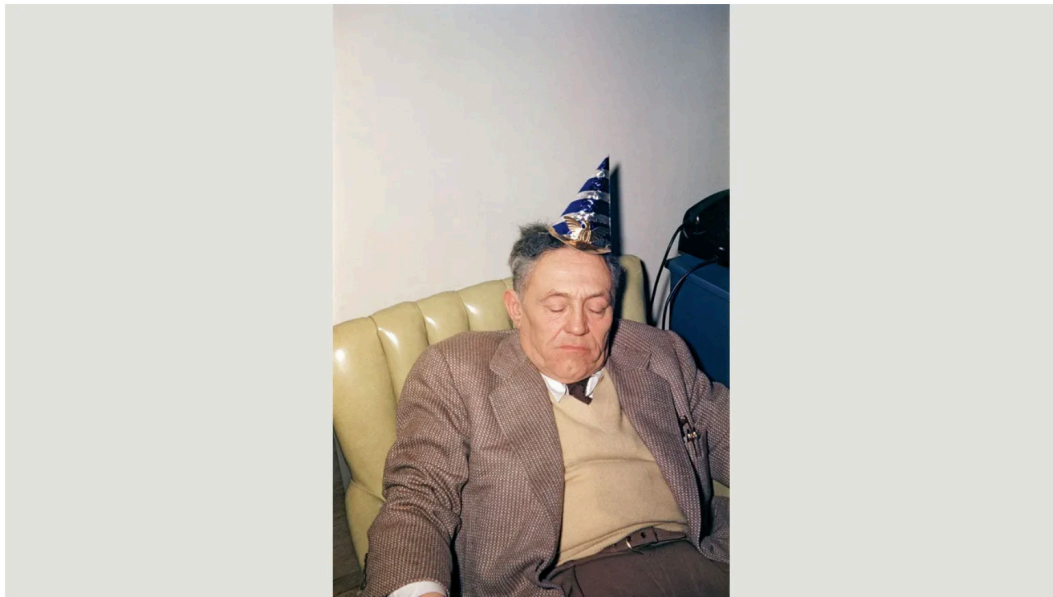


(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

The way slides were originally viewed was another way of coming together. Despite being superseded by new forms of photography, the slide had an appeal that chimes with how images are circulated today. “I think this was the first social media of its time,” says Shulman. “It was just a way of sharing images – you’d get the images back, and you’d invite all your friends and your family over, and you’d do these evening projections. It was the first kind of home cinema – you’d watch them together. There’s a sharing experience and a cinematic experience in that.”



It tied in with the idea of the 'magic lantern'; the thrill of collectively viewing a projected image. "I remember when my dad used to get out the projector, and I thought it was mad and magic and beautiful. It's a meeting of photography and cinema together – when the lights go down, and an image appears; it is a magical moment."



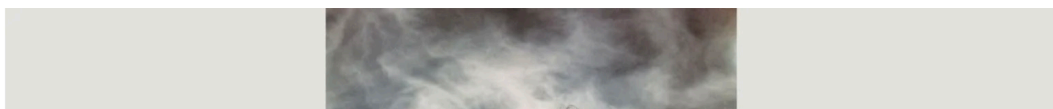
(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

While many images are posed, an equal number remain frozen in an off-kilter moment, their subjects caught napping in an armchair with a party hat fixed to their head or enthusiastically performing the Conga, arms forever held aloft. The vibrant colours and incongruous settings lend some of them a surreal air: an angler lying next to his herbaceous border alongside nine freshly caught fish; a reveller sitting in front of a wall plastered with posters of Hawaii, wearing a hangdog expression and a bedraggled garland.



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

There is an unexpected composition to many that was the result of the technology used. "The fact that they're slides is important to me, because each piece is unique," says Shulman. "For me, it's the most honest type of photography – today you can recrop and everything, but you couldn't do that at the time – you'd take your slide, and you'd get it back and it would be framed as you took it. So there's the beauty and the imperfection of that, which I love."





(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

That said, Shulman doesn't believe these images fit neatly into the category of 'amateur photography'. "Anyone taking pictures had to be pretty professional, because they had to have good gear; they had to know how technically to take a photo, how to use the equipment – it was much more complicated than it is today," he says. "But there's one thing about this type of photography that touches me the most – when you see an image that's beautiful, the relationship between the photographer and the subject is so intimate. Sometimes you get someone looking over their shoulder at the camera, and it's a lover looking at their partner, or a parent looking at their child – it's so charged with emotion. Sometimes you get that look to the camera that you just don't get elsewhere."



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

Because of that relationship, these photos offer a kind of shorthand – a way into their subject's lives, since they never thought strangers would be viewing them. "You're going into a very intimate moment of people's lives," says Shulman. "I think behind closed doors we represent ourselves differently... it's really touching, and lovely to see – it's very joyful."





(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

There's a danger that looking at the images could veer towards voyeurism, because they are so emotionally intimate. Shulman denies that. "I feel like I've built up this massive family – I feel like I know them all." Often, having seen multiple slides, he says: "I do feel very attached to these people, and I feel like a guardian of their lives. It's quite a responsibility in some respects. But I don't feel voyeuristic in the respect that in a way I'm giving them a second life, bringing them back to life – there's something beautiful about the idea this kind of collective memory isn't forgotten."

It could be argued that this is only a collective memory for a select group of people – most of the images show a certain demographic; white and affluent. "The demographic was middle-class in the US because it was an expensive pastime. It didn't represent everybody. But that middle-class society was interesting, because of that post-war moment where there was excess, and people trying to live the American Dream," says Shulman. But "even with the social differences", he believes the images express a kind of universal "emotional value".



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

"There's a lot of love and tenderness in the images. Of course, it's rare to take a picture of someone crying in a family photo, but what I do see is that family is still of enormous importance to everybody – family is a core support. What's lovely is sharing, again – there aren't many pictures of people on their own doing nothing. It's very much people together sharing an experience."



There were some parallels that Shulman didn't expect to see. "I was surprised – despite the social codes of the time about men and women, I see very strong women having an amazing time together smoking cigars. There's a lot more complicity in these images than I imagined that I would have seen." The images themselves were clearly valued by their owners. "When I get the boxes of slides, they're so beautiful – people kept them as very precious moments in their lives," he says. "The object itself was a very precious thing. It was like storing memories into boxes in a very beautifully ordered way."



(Credit: The Anonymous Project)

And the images might have relevance for our own fates – at least, how we live on in photographs. "Records of days at the beach or sitting in the kitchen or riding in a car will eventually become untethered from our biographies," writes Woodward. "In a shorter time than many of us would like to think, our names will begin to disappear, even if the images of our anonymous selves endure." One day, we might all be anonymous.

Midcentury Memories: The Anonymous Project by Lee Shulman, published by Taschen, is out now.

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