

Portrait of Humanity: The Anonymous Project is restoring our collective memory, one colour slide at a time

by BETH RYAN



When filmmaker Lee Shulman bought a box of vintage slides from Ebay, he was hoping for some blurry snaps to flick through on a Sunday afternoon, and maybe a picture or two to keep. But when they arrived, 'I nearly fell off my seat.' What he saw amazed him: here were hundreds of snapshots of strangers' lives. The poses were instantly recognisable: children grinning over birthday cakes, couples squinting on the beach – the simple magic of unstaged life, captured in rich Kodachrome colour.

The price of colour photography plummeted in the early Fifties, allowing people to snap away with newfound freedom. But the chemicals that produce the slides fade over time. If the photos were to disappear, then with them so would the memories of our collective human experience – and Shulman didn't want to let that happen.



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With the help of a friend, photo publisher Emmanuelle Halkin, Shulman created [The Anonymous Project](#). A Paris-based nonprofit, its aim is ambitious: to collect, scan and catalogue all colour slides produced since the Fifties. Since starting the project in January 2017, Shulman and Halkin have collected over 700,000 slides, many of them mysteriously donated. The best ones make it onto their website. Scroll through it and you'll see unknown faces in familiar scenes. Laughter, love, boredom – it's all captured here.

We spoke to Shulman in light of Portrait of Humanity, an initiative seeking to prove that there's more that unites us than sets us apart. The Anonymous Project's mission reflects our own: to document, celebrate and share the universal experience of humanity.





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How has the project evolved?

At first, I was collecting the slides purely because nobody seemed to want them. Quickly, the project evolved into something much more artistic. I realized very early on that there were many recurring themes – both physical and emotional – within the images I saw.

The idea of preserving and exploring this collective memory became a sort of obsession. The images made me think very much about our shared experiences and humanity; I believe that we all share the same goals and hopes in life, and these images are a testament to that.

How do you choose which pictures make the final cut?

The project is very organic, so it often takes us in surprising directions. In artistic projects, the artist is usually in charge, but with this, the images take the lead.

When deciding which pictures enter the collection, the criteria is purely personal. There's a feeling, an attachment, a sense of a story that intrigues me. For me, these images are all about storytelling. Creating new ways of imagining the way we see ourselves in the world.

What are the main themes that you've noticed running through? What do people have in common?

There are so many themes that we have designated categories on our website, ranging from families standing in front of their houses or by their cars to holidays and road trips. We also have more abstract themes – there's one we've called 'Sweet Dreams', which is people photographed while sleeping. We love this one. The subjects don't know they have been immortalized. We also have 'Together' which is a simple but emotionally-charged theme that centres on relationships, both romantic and platonic.

'Different but the same' is how we see ourselves. It may sound a bit cheesy, we have so much more in common that we would ever like to admit. You can't imagine how many photos we have of people just looking at themselves in mirrors. It's a real reflection of life.





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What has the project taught you about humanity?

Well, this is the best part. We live in a world that is considered so fractured and full of division, especially at this moment in time, and yet what I see on a daily basis is totally the opposite. Intimate moments of joy, conciliation, fun, shared moments of conviviality.

I feel that we share so much more than what separates us. These images show us that we all strive for the same goals in life. We all have the same hopes and aspirations for ourselves and our families. What I see here is one big family. They are my family, your family... these are the stories of all our lives.

What are the most moving collections that you've come across?

We recently received a lot from a gentleman in the USA with a very moving letter. The letter told us that he had found a large stock of slides in his recently deceased neighbour's attic. The letter described in detail the life of this wonderful person and his background. They described him and his wife in detail with many of his physical attributes, his husky smoker's voice, his wicked sense of humour and his obsessional love of country music and dance. It gave the images a really emotional edge. We felt like we knew this person. We named the box 'Elmer's box', after him. Not so anonymous, this one.

Will the project ever be over?

Our aim is to share this amazing collection in the form of exhibitions and publications. We are constantly finding new ways of telling these incredible life stories. Everyday brings new challenges and new ideas. In my mind, we have just started and I hope we will continue to find new and exciting ways to explore this collective memory. This is a constant discussion between our images and the public. This I feel has no end.

Do you want to be part of the movement? Together, we will create a Portrait of Humanity



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