

FEATURE

What Makes A House A Home?

By inserting found photographs throughout each room in a small house in Southern France, The Anonymous Project creates playful installations that illustrate the lasting importance of amateur photography.

Photographs courtesy of The Anonymous Project
Text by Cat Lachowskyj

During the summer of 2019, Les Rencontres d'Arles opened for its fiftieth anniversary – a miraculous feat for a photography festival. The opening week brought together an ambitious program of fifty exhibitions to mark the five decades' worth of the annual event. But among the wealth of shows sprawled across the city, a few stood out as informative, well-curated productions that reveal how photography's history has impacted the present, just as the festival's history impacts its own relevance and popularity today.

In particular, The Anonymous Project took over the Maison de Peintres for their exhibition *The House*, mosaicking together an immersive photographic experience that guides visitors up and down the stairs through the many rooms of a small cottage on Boulevard Emile Combes, a main street in the charming city of Arles. Curated by the project's Founder Lee Shulman and Head of Development Emmanuelle Halkin, the images the duo selected for display are no less quirky than the venue itself.



The photographic materials that make up The Anonymous Project are primarily drawn from the early 1950s on, an era when the price of color photography dropped, making it accessible to amateur photographers around the world. In particular, Eastman Kodak's Kodachrome process was favored among families and non-professionals who wanted to capture their world in vibrant color, moving away from the standard black and white films, transparencies and prints that were already in widespread use. The chemical makeup of this new science made colors appear oversaturated and vibrant in an other-worldly way. What's more, the fading tendencies of these earlier methods were only made apparent as time passed after their consumption. Some colors fade quicker than others, resulting in the yellowed, muted tones we often associate with eras past. In other words, the oversaturation and fading in these early color photographs shape how we remember past decades—the 50s, 60s and 70s, in particular.



Anonymous, 1958 © The Anonymous Project

Troubled by the instability of these early color images, The Anonymous Project collects, scans and catalogues color photographic slides from the last 50 years, focusing on images that capture daily life, including weddings, graduations, friends posing for friends, and countless domestic settings. “These amateur photographs are a kaleidoscopic diary of that era, all the more fascinating and arresting because of their unpolished quality,” they explain. “By preserving this important part of our shared experience, we learn about each other and our differences, but more importantly and to a much greater degree, we learn about our shared humanity.”

While many museums and formal institutions collect color materials by stowing them away and making them inaccessible, The Anonymous Project creates compelling manifestations of the work so that their images can be enjoyed by a wider audience. Their quirky take on exhibiting vernacular imagery falls in line with their mandate of accessibility. In particular, *The House* incorporates a series of light boxes that illuminate selected images from the archive, situating them in peculiarly relevant areas of the home. For example, a woman in her kitchen illuminates the entire frame of a 1950s refrigerator ajar, while a glowing image of another subject glows in an open drawer in the house's tiny kitchen. The images feel comforting and familiar, reminiscent of photos we see in old family albums, except they have been returned to their original settings in the various rooms of the house.



Anonymous, 1950 © The Anonymous Project



Anonymous, 1972 © The Anonymous Project

On the structure's upper level, a room with a dining table sets the stage for a slideshow of various images of families and couples eating dinner at home, focusing on birthday celebrations (a nod to the festival's anniversary). In front of this table, a large light box panel features a selection of small original Kodachrome slides and magnifying loupes, allowing visitors to interact with the original source material of the archive, drawing connections between the images on display throughout the various rooms and the materials that were used decades ago to make them. A room stacked with old televisions, each displaying shots of families watching or posing near their own TV sets, is a mesmerizing installation that effortlessly references the past. Each room and detail is an effective educational tool that combines modern forms of display while paying homage to original color methods, making the work both accessible and informative without the oppressive, academic tone of many exhibitions on historical methods.

But the exhibition does more than display old stuff. The candid domestic scenes strewn throughout the house – of families and friends with their pets, with their cars, in their homes, sometimes awake and sometimes caught asleep – all beg the question: *What makes a house a home?* “The simple answer is the people that live in it,” The Anonymous Project explains. “A home is built not by bricks or wood, but with the bond of family. A home is a place that reminds a person of countless memories and values when he walks through a corridor of the house, or looks at one of his belongings.” Walking the narrow halls and cramped rooms of the *Maison de Peintres* feels familiar, even though we have never actually lived in a tiny historic home in the middle of a small town in Southern France. And that's exactly the point. “Home is more than a place; it's a feeling,” they conclude. “It is a feeling of contentment and happiness that they share with the ones they love.”



Anonymous, 1950 © The Anonymous Project

+



Anonymous, 1950 © The Anonymous Project

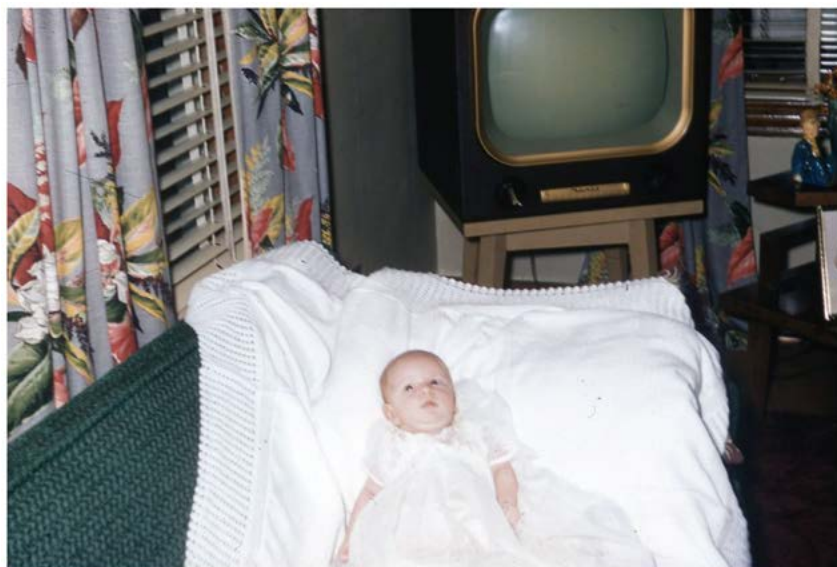
+



Anonymous, 1953 © The Anonymous Project



Anonymous, 1966 © The Anonymous Project



Anonymous, 1959 © The Anonymous Project



Anonymous, 1950 © The Anonymous Project



Anonymous, USA © The Anonymous Project