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Moments Big and Small in Vintage Photos



U.S., late 1950s. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project

By **Sarah Moroz**

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Lee Schulman, an English-born filmmaker based in Paris, decided to buy a random bundle of slides from eBay on a lark. Almost instantly upon examining the contents, “I felt very close to the image,” he said, “and close to the emotions that were transferred.”

That online impulse buy in 2017 inspired him to start collecting vintage slides from all over the world, combing through unsorted parcels alongside his friend, Emmanuelle Halkin, a French photography book editor. He ultimately amassed an archive of a half-million castoff snapshots, in an endeavor known as the [Anonymous Project](#). Each new acquisition has the seductive thrill of an unearthed time capsule, since some of the images have otherwise not been seen in 60 years.

“When we open a box, it is kind of an Indiana Jones thing,” Mr. Schulman said. “There’s something very childish about it. It’s like digging in the garden.”



U.S. 1961. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



U.K., mid-1960s. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



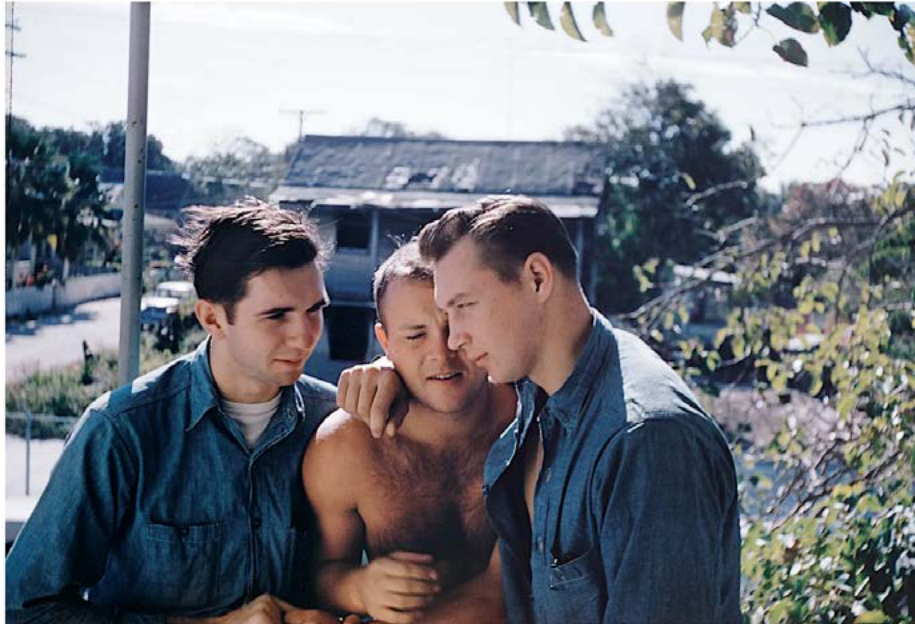
U.S., late 1950s. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project

Boxes sometimes had images chronicling a family's life span — with children growing and parents aging — while others were devoted to a single event. “It's like a storyboard we can make,” Mr. Schulman said. The [digitized catalog](#) is also a behavioral study of the latter half of the 20th century: tracing holiday traditions, consumer habits and depictions of family and relationships as amateur photographers chronicled just about everything they encountered.

Their acquisitions are winnowed down with a purpose: “If you take out landscapes, you take out 90 percent of what we get,” Mr. Schulman said. “When we're editing, we want people in the photo.” The chosen slides are cataloged in a database and posted on [the website](#). To the surprise of Mr. Schulman and Ms. Halkin, milestone events like graduations or fancy holiday gatherings were far from the only occasions people commemorated — many recurrent themes were actually quite banal. Careful editing revealed trends: tiki parties, portraits of household pets (including a subset category of little girls holding guinea pigs), politically incorrect Native American costumes, people diving into pools, poses in front of television sets, people sleeping.



Japan, early 1950s. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



U.S. 1958. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project

And while fashion and fads may have changed, these faintly remembered slices of life still resonate with contemporary viewers. “I realized that what a guy was doing in the 1940s, I did in the ’70s and ’80s,” Mr. Schulman said of the range of both playful and emotional vignettes. “The themes of today are also the themes of earlier times — we’re not different.”

Ms. Halkin added, “There wasn’t social media to diffuse it, but people have always wanted to illustrate and to showcase their lives.” The main differences lie in the modest volume of documentation — incomparable to today’s ceaseless stream — and the limitations of how images could be shared, usually in the parlors of friends or family.

The groans once evoked by the ritualistic image-by-image playback of a vacation projected onto a wall, sheet or screen have been replaced with a sense of delight. “It’s like vinyl: We’ve fallen back in,” Mr. Schulman said.

Nonetheless, the project is not about being retro or nostalgic. “We’re not about analog versus digital — it’s about the meeting of the two worlds, bringing the past and the present together,” Mr. Schulman said. If anything, digitization preserves the delicate originals, and viewing them on a computer screen brings out intriguing details. “This is a project about light,” he emphasized. “The quality is so extraordinary — the colors are so alive, it feels like you’re in the images. They’re miniature tableaux.”

Mr. Schulman estimated that 80 percent of the Anonymous Project's archive is culled from the United States, since slide film's popularity grew when its price fell. A majority of their found photos were taken by, and mostly of, white middle-class Americans — more so than in Europe or elsewhere, although Japan and the United Kingdom are relatively well-represented. Mr. Schulman and Ms. Halkin intend eventually to search more regional web platforms, to broaden the locus of the archives.



Ghana, 1968. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



Untitled. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



U.S., early 1950s. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project

Apart from slides bought online and at flea markets, the archive has grown thanks to donations from people who don't know what to do with a medium that can feel as anachronistic as an 8-track tape. Boxes of slides have been sent in without contextual details; other times, moving personal recollections are paired with the images, including offhand notes, like "mom's birthday," and affectionate recollections, like an American husband describing his experience in Japan to his wife.

"Sometimes we have a back story that's beautiful," Mr. Schulman said. He recalled one woman, who salvaged a box of slides left unclaimed when her neighbor died, sent them to the Anonymous Project with a detailed letter remembering the life of this man who had lived next door to her.

Time, loss and change lend a mournful touch to the Anonymous Project, since the subjects are unknown and many of them are most likely long dead. But there is also a sense of honor and joy in reviving these moments for contemporary viewers, offering a personal portal that transforms the lives of strangers into timeless archetypes of human kinship.

"Memories are what make us human more than anything else in life," Mr. Schulman said. "The way we talk about memory, that's our human DNA."



U.S. 1972. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project



Untitled. Courtesy of The Anonymous Project