▲ Photographer Diop worked with The Anonymous Project, founded by Lee Shulman, a collection of nearly a million Kodachrome slides taken by amateurs, made from the 1940s onwards. Photograph: Omar Victor Diop & Lee Shulman

Time traveller: one Senegalese man's journey to the past – in pictures

Whether it's in segregated America or the glory days of postwar France, Omar Victor Diop appears in photographs of worlds he was previously shut out from

Wed 15 May 2024 08.00 CEST

Join Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop, Lee Shulman (The Anonymous Project archive) and art historian and curator, Taous Dahmani, for a discussion on their collaborative project, Being There; a series which questions photographic archetypes and the foundations of our contemporary society at Somerset House as part of Photo London on 17 May. All photographs: Omar Victor Diop & Lee Shulman/The Anonymous Project/Binome and Magnin-A galleries

Being There exists at the crossroads of Shulman and Diop's artistic universes. As a specialist of self-portraits, the Senegalese photographer introduces himself into the vernacular slide images of The Anonymous Project collection

Shulman founded The Anonymous Project, a collection of almost a million Kodachrome slides, from the 1940s until production ceased in the 2000s. It has become one of the largest collections of amateur photography in the world. You can see more here

The work of staging and re-assembling the images was orchestrated by Shulman. The series revisits about 60 works from the *trente glorieuses* society (a 30-year period of economic growth in France between 1945 and 1975)

Shulman: 'For some time now, I've been asking myself a lot of questions about the photographs in the collection I've created, which essentially depict privileged white middle classes in the 1950s, a period of racial segregation in the United States. What also bothered me was that many of them contained empty chairs. Of course, it's often the chair of the photographer who gets up and leaves his seat for the duration of the shoot. So I figured it would be great if we could put someone in that space instead, and that's how Omar Victor Diop came to mind'

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Diop: 'One of the reasons I agreed was that ever since I started making self-portraits, I've been trying to create a kind of odyssey through time, within different contexts, sometimes even in an allegorical future. It's a way of projecting myself into worlds that aren't necessarily accessible to me, such as 1950s America'

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These augmented pictures question the foundations of our contemporary society. By highlighting absence, Being There opens a conversation about our history

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The Anonymous Project explores history from various angles, from the sociological clues contained in the images to the technical qualities of the film

Dahmani says: 'The duo play with this fluctuation between the trivial and the extraordinary that makes it possible to comment on and question history. The fictional scenarios created by Shulman and Diop rewrite history and recount the past. It is interesting to note that, as early as the 19th century, the abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth demanded that Black Americans be granted the right to representation by being allowed to access portrait studios. In these circumstances, one easily understands the power of Diop's presence in these images'

A second edition of the book Omar Victor Diop x The Anonymous Project: Being There has been published