

The Things We Keep

Susan Dobson's *Slide Library* is a meditation on both past and future. She considers the now almost forgotten technologies by which we once consumed photographic images, while asking us to think about the meanings various photographic objects will hold in years to come. Marshall McLuhan is correct that the ways we see must inevitably shape what we know, and this tribute to the tiny luminous rectangles that once embodied certain histories of art, marks a chance to think back on the means, content, structures and practices that got us to where we are, while looking forward to how the next generations will know what they know and make what they make.

More than those of most artistic disciplines, the histories of photography have often been presented as a history of photographic technology. Indeed it is tempting to understand changes in image making over time as an inexorable march of progress, each innovative step a move towards greater ease and economy that also easily embraces the casual discarding of the suddenly obsolete processes that preceded it. Some of these methods, while certainly no longer *au courant*, remain accessible among the wide choice of arrows in the artist's quiver, offering, sometimes, the exact look and emotional nuance the artist seeks. Thus, Binh Danh makes moving daguerreotype images of American national parks and victims of Cambodian genocide, Sally Mann depicts historical sites within the Old South's landscape in flawed wet collodion images on glass, and Christian Marclay uses archaic media to document other archaic media in his *Cassette Tape* series of cyanotypes. Daguerreotype, collodion and cyanotype are pre-industrial processes, a return to the craft of the handmade singular object. Color slide manufacture, on the other hand, required teams of workers and dedicated factory buildings enclosing huge machines capable of coating a mile long run of film base with three separately color-sensitive emulsions.

The materiality of the slide and the process by which it is consumed is as complex as its manufacture. The non-substantive film itself, with its visible texture of a relief image on the emulsion side, is thin enough to ensure a jewel-like luminosity unrivaled by the digital projections of today. The mount may be cardboard, plastic, metal or glass, and can be numbered, labeled, written on or otherwise marked. The mechanism that both stores and organizes them may be a plastic or metal carousel or a slide stack tray. The distinctive system by which multiple slides are viewed serially, requires a projector, a screen, and a darkened room, leading to a performative and time-based experience that is somewhere between still photographs and movies. The projector requires electricity, and bulbs that are, now, increasingly difficult to find. Over time, the slides accrue marks of their use: dust, fingerprints, scratches, even burns and melt marks from being projected too long. There are eight ways these little rectangles can be inserted into their slot in a carousel; only one is correct. The projector can jam, break or otherwise malfunction. Slides are slow to process, and expensive to duplicate

When Eastman Kodak stopped manufacturing Kodachrome in 2009, it marked the end of making and experiencing these greatly magnified, high resolution, sharp and accurately colored images. The culture had moved on anyway. Families no longer gathered in the dark for slide shows of birthdays and holidays. Photojournalists found faster, less expensive ways to capture color. Teachers, in particular, were quick to embrace the ease, economy and versatility of digital files that were easily made, instantly available, and could be situated within several lectures simultaneously. The distinctive sound that heralded a new image on the screen---almost heartbeat-like in its two-part click and rumble--- would be heard no more. The once-ubiquitous boxed carousel tray was relegated to Art Department storage closets where one might still sometimes find boxes of even more anachronistic glass lantern slides. The file cabinets that stored and sorted copies of centuries of paintings and photographs were used less and less, eventually remaining unopened for months, and semesters, and years.

This is the circumstance of the slides that Dobson discovered in two Canadian art departments in 2016. She photographed them as objects, regardless of the images they carried, showing them as innumerable small fragments of knowledge, almost overwhelming in quantity and uniformity. She documented them as manifestations of systems of storage, organization, and thought, labeled and categorized by lecture topic, geography or artist. She photographed stolid file cabinets and open drawers. The drawers and hanging files are dusty, conveying a sense of having been abandoned in place. Many are packed full, with further categorization indicated by the brightly coloured slips of paper inserted by the archivist to identify subjects by genre. Others, notably a drawer labeled "Africa Ceylon" holds barely 30 slides, all bordered in white, in a drawer meant to hold hundreds. It's hard not to read this as a metaphor for the paucity of attention non-Western art receives in the standard North American curriculum.

In this series, Dobson has also photographed plastic carousels of slides, from above and on a rich black background, thus emphasizing their formal qualities as well as their precisely formed mechanical nature. None of the carousels are full. Their lacunae suggest interrupted lectures, paused thoughts, and incomplete stories, as well perhaps, as the recontextualizing of a single slide by its removal from one carousel's narrative and replacement in another. These relics are fraught with such associations for those of us who grew up with them, but it is important to note that Dobson is less concerned with presenting a nostalgia machine than she is with urging us to think about photography in terms not of its technologies so much as of the things it has left behind. Most of the images in this series are printed large enough that we lose all sense of scale. The crooked stacks of worn slides within a dusty drawer become architectural. The carousel is a mandala that exceeds the width of our shoulders, becoming an unrecognizable artifact, as it will surely be to the next generations.

Dobson's coda image is small, a mere 8"x10" presented as a negative, with all tones in reverse, recapitulating the most photographic aspects of the medium's analogue period.

The image is of a tiny, lidded, almost transparent, plastic container, only a few inches high and clearly intended for preserving leftover food. It is packed full of perhaps a carousel's worth of slides. As with Dobson's other photographs, the images the slides carry cannot be made out, but one slide, held tightly against the container wall by the slides behind it, has a legible label: "Eastman George Unknown photographer with a No. 2 Kodak." It is, in fact, an icon in the history of photography, although (or because) it is a snapshot. It is the image on the cover of Beaumont Newhall's fourth edition of The History of Photography, the self-confident singular article of the title heralding the monolithic version of the medium's development that still dominates our knowledge today. This photograph shows a photographer photographing a photographer, as Dobson is a photographer photographing photographs of photographs. This small round brown picture that she chooses not to show is almost invariably the image on a slide used to illustrate the technical advance that democratized photography for good, establishing a social practice that leads directly to the Kodachrome slide and then past it, headlong, to what we have now.

Alison Nordström, 2018