



VRA Bulletin

Volume 49
Issue 2 *Fall/Winter*

Article 6

December 2022

Slides as Artifacts of Nostalgia: Personal and Professional Ruminations

Lael Ensor-Bennett

Johns Hopkins University, lensor@jhu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://online.vraweb.org/>

Recommended Citation

Ensor-Bennett, Lael. "Slides as Artifacts of Nostalgia: Personal and Professional Ruminations." *VRA Bulletin*, vol. 49, iss. 2, article 6 (December 2022). Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/index.php/vrab/article/view/225>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by VRA Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in the *VRA Bulletin* by an authorized editor of VRA Online.

Slides as Artifacts of Nostalgia: Personal and Professional Ruminations

Abstract

The digital revolution is generally perceived to have made 35mm slides obsolete, but somehow along the way, a shift has begun to transform what was viewed as old and defunct to trendy and nostalgic. In this article, I ponder how obsolete physical media, or contemporary substitutions, can disrupt our habitation in the increasingly digital world and bridge our longing for a past remembered or imagined and our desire to instill authenticity in our current moment.

Keywords

Visual resources, 35mm slides, technology, analog, art history, crafting, digitization, memory-keeping, nostalgia, slide projectors, students, surrogate images.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Lael Ensor-Bennett is the Curator of the Visual Resources Collection in the History of Art Department at Johns Hopkins University.

Recently a student employee of the Visual Resource Collection (VRC) at Johns Hopkins University stopped by my office to show me that during the process of evaluating a drawer of our 35mm slides, she had found a slide deaccessioned by another academic institution listed for sale (by a non-affiliated individual) on eBay for \$10!¹ Glancing over to our oversized blue recycling bin full of about 14,000 discarded slides, I wondered if I was looking at a bin of what most folks would consider junk or \$140,000 worth of collectibles. This incident illustrated something I have been thinking for a while about the changes in perception of slides over the last few years. When and how did slides turn from being viewed as old and defunct to trendy and nostalgic?²

The digital revolution is generally perceived as having made slides obsolete. In the catalog for the landmark exhibition *SlideShow* organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2005, then Museum Director Doreen Bolger wrote in the foreword that “slides are rapidly becoming less familiar...we are on the verge of thinking nostalgically about a once cutting-edge technology...slide projection will soon be lost from the realm of the everyday.”³ Writing in the same catalog, Robert Storr noted that “industry and commerce have no further use for them.”⁴ More than a decade later in 2017, James Hansen noted that, “marked by increasingly distant memories...slide projectors simultaneously become obsolescent technologies and objects of nostalgia.”⁵ As we move further away from a time when slides and slide projectors were prevalent in our classrooms and in our homes, our associations with the technology become viewable through the fond sepia-toned lens of a simpler past – or “what was” – rather than in relation to the digital technologies that we live with every day.

For those who attended art history lectures before around 2010, the memory of slides and the sounds of the projector are bound up in the images of art themselves. Nelson notes that “slide lectures, like the photographic technology that made them possible, have had a profound impact on art history; indeed, for many who have passed through university classes, art history *is* the illustrated lecture.”⁶ As an older millennial, I went through my undergraduate and graduate school days with a combination of image viewing technologies. Some classes still relied entirely on slides, while others were experimenting with new digital tools and software. When I discuss the transition from slides to digital images with our students, I often recall a particular session of a graduate seminar from the spring of 2008 when my advisor would excitedly, deftly, and without missing a beat, jump up and down to switch back and forth between his slide carousels and the digital projector. As Robert Nelson wrote in 2000, “for a bit more than a century, teaching and lecturing about art has relied on photographic slides, but what is commonplace today is about to be digitalized into oblivion,”⁷ and that memory of that seminar has always stuck with me, in part because it seemed to represent a unique moment during the technological shift in the teaching of the history of art.

My own nostalgia for slides and print photographic media, in addition to university slide lectures, comes from many memories of dropping off a roll of film or a disposable camera at the pharmacy in the provided envelope and the joy and sorrow of later opening that same returned envelope of finished prints.⁸ Yet I, at 38 years old, do not myself have any personal memories of the ubiquitous family vacation slideshow – “the communal experience of showing and receiving large-scale pictures of private life in a color-saturated palette...a coming together for members of a discrete clan, a time to watch and reminisce in the comfort of the living room.”⁹ Long before I ever worked at a slide library,¹⁰ I was aware of the concept because it was commonplace enough to

appear in popular media, as exemplified in *The Simpsons* episodes where the entire nuclear family would gather together to forcibly (and miserably) view Aunt Patty and Aunt Selma’s vacation slides.

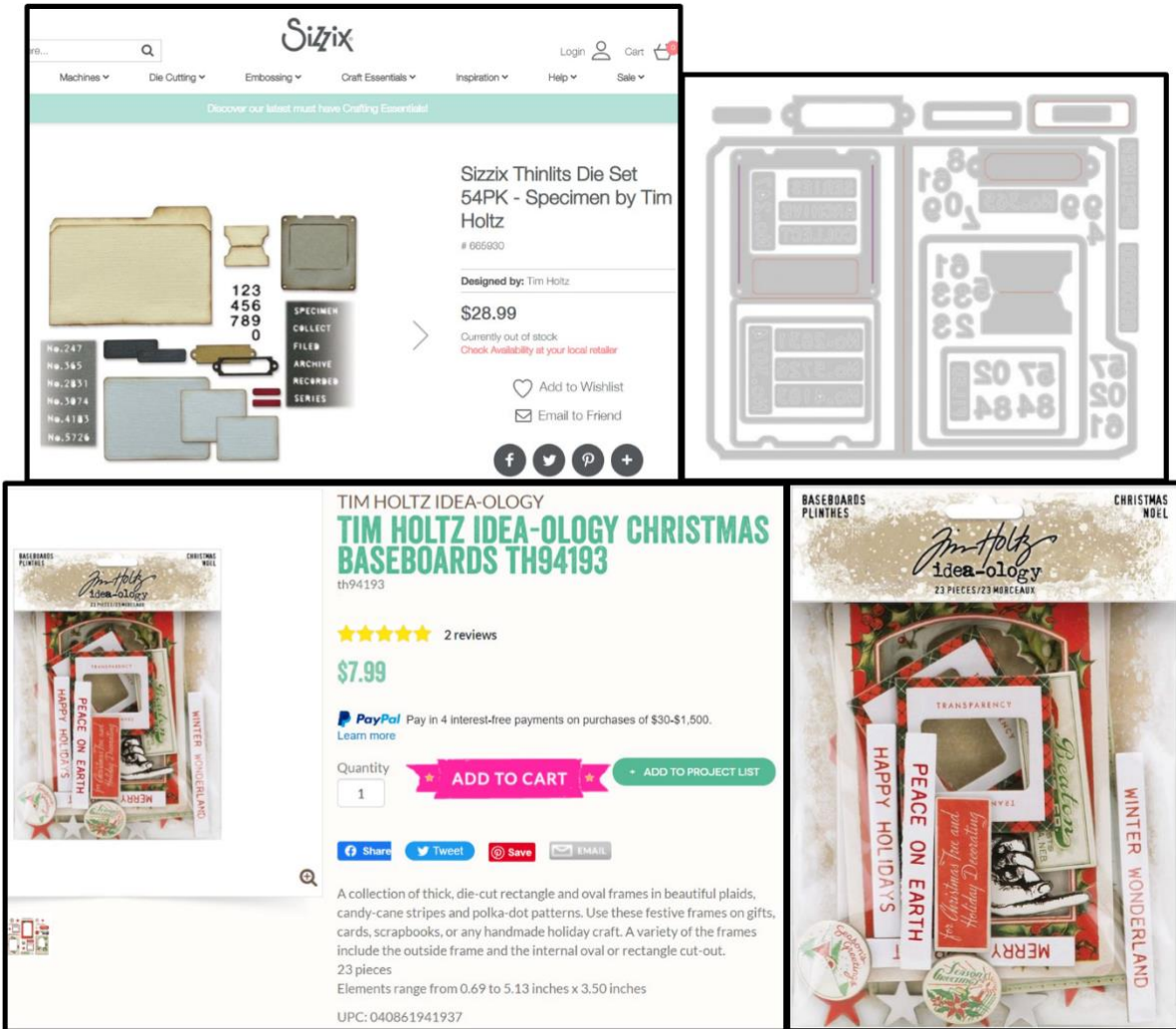


Figure 1: (top): Sizzix Thinlits Die Set 54PK - Specimen by Tim Holtz; (bottom): Tim Holtz Idea-ology Christmas Baseboards TH 94193. (Simon Says Stamp and Sizzix online shops as accessed by the author on October 18, 2022).

While folks may have a range of memories of this experience or, perhaps, secondhand associations from television or other media, there are many, including some of the VRC’s newer undergraduate employees, who have never seen a slide before, do not understand that they were used for projection, and may not realize that prior to digital photography, one’s film had to be developed. For the youngest among us, students and visual resources staff included, there may be no memory of “the clunky music of the projector’s fan and its regulating mechanism...percussive sounds signal[ing] the disappearance of an old image and the appearance of a new one.”¹¹

Nevertheless, I have noticed a renewed fascination not confined to long used and worn slides such as the one our student found on eBay or the heavily and lovingly used slides of our VRC collection. In addition to the market for used slides, there is evidence within the crafting community that consumers may also be interested in manufacturing their own. Within the last year, the popular crafting brand Sizzix started selling a wafer-thin die set called “Specimen” by designer Tim Holtz that includes a die to make a 35mm slide out of cardstock (fig. 1).¹² Designed very thoughtfully with

a well-placed score line, the paper slide can be folded to allow a photograph or other image on paper to be inserted. The complete set includes old-fashioned label tags, as well as manilla folders. A review of this product from this summer on the popular paper craft retailer Simon Says Stamp by KathT notes that the purchase was worth it “just for the slide template alone.”¹³ As of the writing of this paper in late October 2022, this product is sold out on both the Sizzix and Simon Says Stamp websites, and unavailable as a standalone product on Amazon.

This holiday season, the same designer has also produced a faux empty coated chipboard 35mm slide mount similar to “ephemera,” as it is known in the paper craft world, promoted as part of a set of frames or “baseboards” in the Idea-ology line.¹⁴ Of course, for those who prefer to do their shopping on the online marketplace Etsy, there are plenty of options for empty slide mounts as well as used slides, available for purchase, some labeled “new” and others labeled “vintage,” “retro,” or both.¹⁵ In fact, I have made art¹⁶ myself with slides, including holiday lightboxes (fig. 2) – I wonder, if I lacked access to a treasure trove of discarded slides through the VRC, would I find myself trawling through Etsy and eBay?

I see these craft products as part of the continuing popularity of the rustic, distressed, retro, farmhouse, and vintage¹⁷ in crafting and contemporary design which all extend into “memory-keeping” and the ability to curate that past materially, rather than just digitally. The trend to purchase new instant cameras could be considered along the same vein, but Polaroids do not need a projector to be viewed properly, and these craft products are presupposing a lack of film. We are, in fact, creating a surrogate¹⁸ object that recalls a past we ourselves may have never experienced. If our scrapbook pages or junk journals about our 2022 summer vacations contain faux 35mm slides, what exactly are we signaling?

According to Stephen Brown, the consumer nostalgia market is still alive and well twenty years after it was first noted, both as a response to “troubled times,” but also because “our capacity for reminiscence has been immeasurably enhanced by the existence of illimitable on-line archives.”¹⁹ In 2017, Mohsin Hamid wrote that “on our dominant social networks we are pulled out of the present moment to constantly shape and examine and interact with carefully curated pasts. Through technology the past is made real to us in a way that it has never been before.”²⁰ However, as a colleague recently said to me about the uptick in interest in slides, folks are attracted to “the lure of the physical object in a digital world.”²¹ As David Sax writes in *Revenge of the Analog*, “Analog gives us



Figure 1: Holiday lightboxes made with 35mm slides, cardstock, and LED fairy lights, 2021. Photograph by the author.

the joy of creating and possessing real, tangible things in realms where physical objects and experiences are fading.”²² I wonder if a wish to spread that joy led me to sentimentally save a discarded slide from the 1970s for my husband – the slide in question depicted a painting related to a play he fondly remembers directing in college. When I presented it to him, he took it to be a precious object, a trinket, but a trinket nonetheless imbued with a deep meaning – a piece of history and a connection to his own creative past.

Maybe it is a similar experience with faux slides or unused slide mounts. In addition to the draw towards a physical object, these pieces of cardboard serve as perfunctory surrogates for an *imagined* past era grafted onto the present. While “it is entirely possible to fantasise about the ‘halcyon days’ before you were born and to feel the mythologising effect of intentionally aged images,”²³ in fact, the “distressed” effect creates the very sense of authenticity²⁴ that is enough to suggest that such images could have existed in the past.²⁵ Perhaps, as David Lowenthal argues, “we crave evidence that the past endures in recoverable form,”²⁶ but that form need not be one that actually existed. “Media can serve as a means of virtually accessing the past,” and nostalgic sentiment can engage with an object’s materiality,²⁷ making the faux slide a physical conduit to an imagined and desired past. Hansen writes “the processes of nostalgia: far from being a static, sentimental snapshot of a timeless, idealistic vision of the past, nostalgia operates as a constantly moving image that longs for the past not yet experienced.”²⁸

Like many institutions, the Johns Hopkins University VRC continues to work through a slow process of evaluating our 35mm slide collection; however, the VRC’s relationship with slides goes beyond their required storage space and obsolescence as a teaching medium. Slides are still relevant to our faculty, and increasingly, to our students. In the past academic year, I have worked with slides on behalf of faculty more than in the last nine. For one course, I set up a slide projector and a full carousel so that the instructor could discuss the history of art historical pedagogy. I have brought slides to three different sessions discussing the history of cataloging and how the past continues to inform the present. An eminent emeritus faculty member asked us to evaluate his personal slide collection for digitization – a truly unique resource for anyone interested in his subject area. An archaeologist faculty member asked me to scan several slides depicting excavations for which there are no other reliable photographs. Another faculty member asked me to digitize his slides for his fall survey course – a summer project that turned into a delightful literature reconstruction of the 1990s. While some images had readily available digital surrogates, about half did not.

In all the courses mentioned, students eagerly took deaccessioned slides home with them, with several coming back later to take more. A group of students are excitedly planning to help me design an event where we make art with our deaccessioned slides with the hope of giving them new life and not ending up in a landfill. A student in another department wrote me just this past week to ask if she could take more slides from the discard bin for her work on found footage and visual appropriation. Another wanted to enhance their research on a particular artist by filling a carousel with slides and borrowing a projector in order to better understand what someone working with slides in the 1970s would have experienced.

Slides used in the teaching of the history of art began their lives with a simple function, but their function has continued to evolve. They tell us about the work of art they depict, both visually and in label text, but also situate the teaching of that work of art in a time and a place. They detail how art history was taught collectively and the unique implementations of art history teaching at a particular school. But these slides, as well as those outside the realm of academia, also take on new meaning for researchers, artists, and memory keepers. They remind us of a past we may not have experienced but which we believe can inform and augment our current experiences and lend them weight and authenticity in the midst of the digital world. For those of us who make physical photo

albums, scrapbooks, junk journals, and memory books, we delight in the physical object and its presence in our space.

In discussing the demise of slides, Darsie Alexander wrote in 2005 that “the termination of slide projection as such may signal the end of an era; it may also represent the culmination of a wider investigation into the transience of images and the truly fleeting nature of perceptual experience. Indeed, what accelerates may eventually disappear.”²⁹ When we purchase a \$7.99 package of pre-made “ephemera,” and we insert a photo we have printed from Snapfish into the chipboard slide mount, are we hoping to simply dilute the chirping of our phones or to hold tight to something we already perceive as lost?

¹ When I searched eBay then filtered by “film slides” on October 26, 2022, more than 74,000 results returned, many of which were individual slides listed for more than \$10.

² For a discussion of nostalgia, slides, slide projectors, and carousels as they appear in the “wheel scene” in the television show *Mad Men*, see pages 9-11 of Stephen Brown, “Retro Galore! Is There No End to Nostalgia?” *Journal of Customer Behaviour* 17, no. 1 (2018): 9-29.

³ Doreen Bolger, “Foreword,” in *SlideShow*, edited by Darsie Alexander, Charles Harrison, and Robert Storr, Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art (2005), ix.

⁴ Robert Storr, “Next Slide, Please...,” in *SlideShow*, 69.

⁵ James Hansen, “Nostalgic Media: Histories and Memories of Domestic Technology in the Moving Image,” PhD diss., (The Ohio State University, 2017): 8.

⁶ Robert Nelson, “The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art History,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.3 (Spring 2000): 415.

⁷ Nelson, “The Slide Lecture,” 414.

⁸ The ones that came out terribly that you now have two of and the perfect shots you’ll slide into the sheets of your album that’s still yellowing on a shelf somewhere...

⁹ Darsie Alexander, “SlideShow,” in *SlideShow*, 3.

¹⁰ After I had experience working in a slide library, I inherited my grandparents’ collection of 35mm slides. While I have made efforts to digitize the vast majority, I cannot bear the thought of parting with the physical objects.

¹¹ Robert Storr, “Next Slide, Please...,” in *SlideShow*, 55.

¹² “Tim Holtz Sizzix SPECIMEN Thinlits Dies,” Simon Says Stamp, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://www.sizzix.com/665930/sizzix-thinlits-die-set-54pk-specimen-by-tim-holtz>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A version of this faux slide mount was also available for purchase during the 2021 holiday season. “Tim Holtz Idea-ology CHRISTMAS Baseboards th94193,” Simon Says Stamp, accessed October 18, 2022,

https://www.simonsaysstamp.com/product/tim-holtz-idea-ology-christmas-baseboards-th94193-c21th94193?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIIsIWyy6zl-gIVTLJCh0o-Q4ZEAAYASAAEgIgevD_BwE. For sample crafts, see “2022 IDEA-OLGY COLLECTION,” Tim Holtz, accessed October 18, 2022,

<https://timholtz.com/2022-idea-ology-collection/>

¹⁵ As noted on a search on October 26, 2022.

¹⁶ To learn more about contemporary artists using slides and slide projectors, see the entirety of Alexander et al., *SlideShow* and Hansen, “Nostalgic Media.”

¹⁷ While not directly relevant to the current practices of the craft community, see “Appreciating the Look of Age,” pages 148-182 in David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) for a discussion on how “old things should look old,” and how “decay demonstrates and secures antiquity.”

¹⁸ How strange to discuss a surrogate for an object that in and of itself is a surrogate for something else!

¹⁹ Brown, “Retro Galore!” 17-18.

²⁰ Mohsin Hamid, “Back to the future,” *The Guardian Review* (February 25, 2017): 2-3.

²¹ Sara Schumacher, text message to author, August 4, 2022.

²² David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, New York: PublicAffairs (2016): 238.

²³ Gil Bartholyens, “The Instant Past: Nostalgia and Digital Retro Photography” in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2014): 54.

²⁴ According to Gary Cross, “Today’s nostalgia is less about preserving an ‘unchanging golden age’ than it is about capturing the fleeting and the particular in its ‘authenticity.’” Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*, New York: Columbia University Press (2015): 15. When discussing souvenirs, Susan Stewart writes, “The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present.” Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press (1993): 139.

²⁵ Bartholyens, “The Instant Past,” 54.

²⁶ Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 14.

²⁷ Dominik Schrey, “Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation,” in *Media and Nostalgia*, 29.

²⁸ Hansen, “Nostalgic Media,” 14.

²⁹ Alexander, “Introduction,” in *SlideShow*, xxii.