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# The Baby and the Bath Water: Reassessing Analog Slides

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# The Baby and the Bath Water: Reassessing Analog Slides

## **Abstract**

The curator of Sonoma State University's Art and Art History Department Image Collection describes her strategy for preserving unique and original images that document local history while preparing for the eventual disposition of 150,000 35mm slides acquired over 45 years in support the department's curriculum. She is ferreting out the collection's original photography of exhibitions and installations and work by faculty and other local artists that demonstrate the vibrant culture history of Northern California and seeking permission from the artists to display images of their work.

## **Keywords**

disposition of analog slide collections, artist permissions, local art history

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Karen Kessel has worked as the Visual Resources curator at Sonoma State University for 24 years following 9 years in the same position at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She earned an interdisciplinary Master's Degree at SSU in Art History and Anthropology with a thesis on bird imagery in Ancestral Puebloan ceramics.

Mark Pompelia organized a session for the 2004 annual Visual Resources Association conference in Portland Oregon entitled “Out with the Bath Water? The Orphaning of the Analog Image Surrogate,” during which panelist Sara Jane Pearman, then the slide curator for the Cleveland Museum of Art, announced that her institution had built a new wing where her office was to be relocated that provided no room for slides, and that her slides were going to be discarded. Hers was one of the first institutions to make that move. The first question asked during the discussion period was “Where is your dumpster?” While audience members were alarmed at the time, it was not very long before other institutions began to mandate discarding analog slide collections as faculty rapidly made the shift to teaching with digital images and surfing the web to find them.

As a preventive measure to avoid throwing out images that are unique and that contribute to our local history as well as to the broader history of art, architecture, and culture in some instances, I am taking the steps outlined below to rescue such images as I sift through our slide collection and discard the faded and duplicate slides.

Sonoma State University’s (SSU) Art and Art History Image Collection is forty-five years old. The collection contains approximately 150,000 slides. As we make the transition from slide to digital format, my goal has been to sort out the materials we have that are not easily found on the internet or ARTStor so that the labor of scanning will be most economical. Like most other academic departmental collections, the majority of our images were shot from printed reproductions, but we do have a significant number of original slides. I will describe what these slides document and how they are significant to our local history.



**Figure 1. Christo, *The Running Fence*, September 1976, Sonoma County, California. Photograph by Kirk de Ford. Used with permission of the photographer.**



Figure 2. San Francisco Artists Soap Box Derby, MacLaren Park. Don Potts, Down Hill Racer #2, 1975.

Our original materials cover the spectrum of familiarity from world renowned Bulgarian artist Christo's early major environmental site-specific work, *The Running Fence*, installed near our campus in 1976 with the help of our students and faculty; to documentation of local events like the Artists Soap Box Derby, sponsored by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976 and again in 1978 to raise funds for purchasing new artwork,

in which SSU sculpture professor, Don Potts, participated. My immediate goal is to find out which of our slides are indeed original and then, for works not yet in the public domain, locate the artists or their estate representatives to attempt to obtain their permission to publicly display the images. Besides documenting famous works in our collection, this process will help to create an image database of the artists who have worked and taught in our region over the past forty-five years. Some of them have become more well-known than others, but they have all contributed to our local history, and this project will preserve their legacies. Our local art and history museum is also interested in this project as a resource. I envision that the project could become part of the process of documenting our region's cultural history with their partnership.



Figure 3. Second San Francisco Artists Soap Box Derby, 1978. Larry Fuente, artist.

The original images in the collection come from several sources. I have documented all of the works exhibited in our departmental art gallery over the past

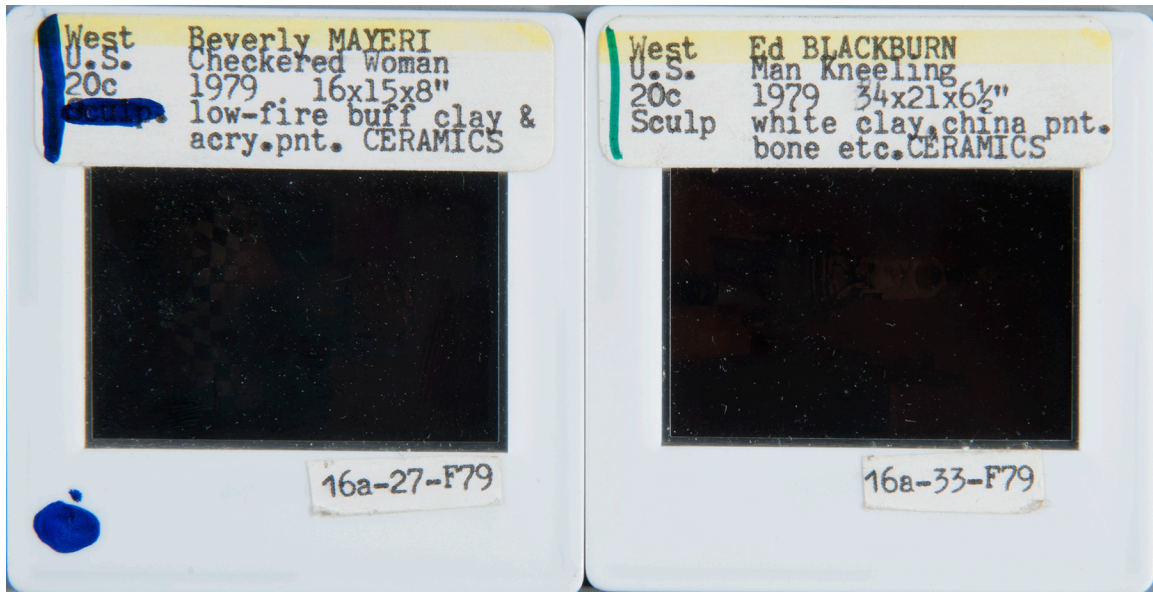
twenty-four years in slide format until 2006 and digitally since then, and I have contributed slides that I have taken while travelling and of various shows and sites I have visited. My predecessors shot some of the shows in the gallery and works in museums in the San Francisco Bay Area. The faculty who have taught here have donated slides of their own work. Other artists have donated slides of their work over the years, and art historians have donated views of works they have studied and other images from their travels. Our gallery director keeps his own collection of slides in the Image Collection space that he has shot in artists' studios, galleries, and museums. His slide collection resides in a separate cabinet and has mostly his handwritten labels, many of which only record the artist's name.

During my twenty-four years at SSU I have kept records of the sources of all of the slides that I have produced, but for the years before that the records are spotty, so I had to develop strategies for discovering which of our slides are originals from the previous twenty-one years.

My first step was to visit the campus Archives in our library to peruse the listings of Art department faculty in each of the old college catalogs and create a list of all of the faculty who have taught in our department since the campus opened. For the first few years there were only two Art faculty, and with only forty-five years of history it was not as time-consuming as it might be for the more venerable older universities. The earliest catalogs did not distinguish art historians from studio artists, so I recorded all of the names. Some of our art historians have also been working artists, too. I then looked up each professor's name in our legacy slide collection. The college catalogs did not usually include artists who taught part time, so this method is by no means comprehensive, but it did lead me to several names included in the collection.

Next, I went through the old slide order records of my predecessors. Our collection began to be cataloged on a computer two years before I commenced working here, but the database did not include source information. Before 1989 the only record-keeping was a single shoe box with index cards recording the names of the artists in the collection, and handwritten order sheets in a file cabinet in the back room with the sources and page numbers for written publications. It helped that I had worked in this same collection as a student assistant for one semester in 1978. The curator I worked for then attached tiny pieces of slide labels with a number code on the lower part of each slide, linking it to the order records in the back room file cabinet. These little tags only covered the years from 1974 to 1983, when that curator had left. When I returned to SSU in 1991, two student assistants who were maintaining the collection were peeling these tiny labels off of the slides and discarding them because they did not realize that they had any significance. I knew enough to stop them only because I had attached some of those labels myself and knew that they linked the slides to their sources. This still leaves us with a gap of eight years when the collection grew at a more rapid pace. The order records after 1983 have book titles and page numbers but no numbers linking them to slides or artists.

Last fall, I assigned an intern to work with me on the project to find the original artists in our collection and contact them for permissions. Her first task was to go through the old paper records and pull out any record sheets that were not apparently book or magazine titles. This provided us with quite a few names of people who had donated slides, and records of shows that the curator who worked from 1974-1983 had shot at Bay Area museums. I found one of these records that the intern had missed when I called an artist who told me that his work, represented in our collection, had only been in a show at SFMOMA. The slide order had the typewritten exhibition list from the show with my predecessor's notes from when she had shot it, and that led to photos of the other works and artists from that show.



This # refers to 16a-1-F79  
This # 16a-F79

16a-1-F79  
**16a-F79**  
SLIDE LIBRARY

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, SONOMA

WORK ORDER NO: 16a DATE: Sept. 21, 79

ORDERED BY: Slide Library

TITLE: Northern California Clay Routes; Sculpture Now

AUTHOR: S.F. Museum of Modern Art ISSUE, DATE, VOLUME: Aug 17 - Sept 30, 79  
*original slides by C. Satri Pencak. H.S. Ektachrome 160 pushed to 320*

\*\*\* PLEASE USE A SEPARATE LINE FOR EACH SLIDE DESIRED. ALL FIGURES LISTED ON THE SAME LINE WILL BE COMBINED ON ONE SLIDE \*\*\*

*1/5 f2.5*

Page Number	Figure Number	NOTES
1	21	
2	21	
3	21	detail
4	32	
5	32	detail
6	36	
7	33	
21	1	
22	1	detail
23	1	detail
24	1	detail
25	24	
26	24	detail
27	25	

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CLAY ROUTES: SCULPTURE NOW  
 August 17 - September 30, 1979  
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

*320  
1/5 f3.5*

This exhibition is sponsored by the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and made possible by a grant from The Charles E. Merrill Trust.

Checklist

In the listing of dimensions, height precedes width precedes depth. All works are lent by the artist unless otherwise indicated. An \* indicates the work is illustrated in the catalog.

DAVID BEST ✓

14 1. Untitled, 1979, porcelain, plaster, bones, wood and fabric, 60 x 21 x 33"  
 Lent by Joseph and Judy Raffael, San Geronimo, California

J-1a  
 ED BLACKBURN ✓

A ~~2~~ 2. Four Oars, 1979, low-fire white clay, glaze, china paint, enamel paint and wood, 82 x 20 x 10"  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco

20 \* 3. Man Kneeling, 1979, low-fire white clay, glaze, china paint, wood, plaster, bone, cord and tacks, 34 x 21 x 6 1/2"  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco

ROBERT BRADY ✓ *plus detail?*

B \* 4. Blouse, 1979, intermediate-fired stoneware and acrylic paint, 64 x 62 x 5"  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

10 5. Serpent, 1979, intermediate-fired stoneware and acrylic paint, 45 x 106 x 5"  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco



Figure 4. Ed Blackburn, *Man Kneeling*, 1979. Low-fire ceramic.

Figure 4. Beverly Mayeri, *Checkered Woman*, 1979. Acrylic paint on low-fired ceramic.

From these three sources--the records in the database that I had modified in 1991, the old paper slide order records, and our gallery director's slides--I put together a spreadsheet of artist names, along with columns for their medium, life dates, contact information, and permission restrictions. I am checking the internet to eliminate works that are already posted on websites in high resolution. There are plenty of images of Christo's Fence on the internet, but none showing the construction process that we have. I composed a form letter for artists and their estate representatives asking for permissions, that explains where I plan to distribute the images and for what purpose. The intern began searching the internet to locate the artists for whom we did not have contact information. Some of these are famous artists and international artists, while others are very local. I learned very quickly that some of the more famous artists or their estates are represented by VAGA or ARS, the artists' rights agencies, and that they have one standard form to fill out to request permission to display images of works by any of the artists they represent. They require that you list the specific works for which you are asking permission, and there is a per image fee, depending on the use, which is quite pricey. As we find contact information, I have been sending out the forms, mostly by email, and some responses have come back very quickly. I was able to contact some artists that I could not find on the internet by asking other artists who know them.





**Figure 5. Christo, *The Running Fence under construction*, 1976, Sonoma County, California.**

The complications that have arisen have included insufficient documentation of the artist, artists who do not respond, and locating the estate representatives of recently deceased artists. The intern in a couple of cases found the wrong artist by not paying attention to what medium the artist worked in and their life dates. I made a separate form for artists' estate representatives in order to document both the artist's name and the representative's. I tried out the form on our current faculty first, and some of them were confused by the options I gave them. I used three of the Creative Commons licenses plus the two options of denying permission entirely or absolute public domain and asked them to select one. Some of them checked all of the options. So I narrowed the options down to two of the more restrictive Creative Commons licenses plus the all or nothing option. I pre-signed the permission form and scanned it with

my signature so that the artists could check and sign the form, scan it, and then return it to me by email and we would both have copies

with both of our signatures. This is going to be a time-consuming process. Not knowing the titles of many of the works in our gallery director's collection means sometimes having to describe the work to the artist's representative and hoping they can recognize it, without just going ahead and scanning it piecemeal to show them. A few artists have wanted to review the image quality before granting permission, which means scanning the images first.

So far, the response has been rewarding and interesting. Artists have told me who inspired them to become artists. Old newspaper articles have surfaced about some controversial works. Some artists are a lot more involved than others, concerned for how and where their work is represented. Some offer to send me images of their newest work. There will be the problem of orphan works. I will probably go ahead and opt for display and wait for reaction. It is slow going, but I am gathering the permission forms into a folder as we receive them. I would recommend for others taking this approach to first check the VAGA and ARS websites and the list of artists that they represent to cover that base first. Additionally, remember the limits of the copyright law for any works that were created before 1923. You may have a treasure trove of local history at your finger tips that should be reassessed before letting it all go. Following is the text of the permission letter and form I send out, along with links to the Creative Commons licenses offered.

Dear Artist:

Original photographs of your work are part of the Image Collection in the Art and Art History Department at Sonoma State University. As part of the process of converting the parts of our legacy 35mm slide collection that are original materials to digital format, we respectfully request permission to disseminate our images of your work on a publicly accessible website. These images are of works that were exhibited in our art gallery or in other public places and photographed by a Sonoma State University faculty or staff member and identified with whatever descriptive information could be obtained. These works may be disseminated through the following venues:

**Scholarworks Visual Collective**, the California State University web portal for sharing images from CSU campus image collections within CSU campuses or publicly with permission.

**ARTstor Shared Shelf Commons** and **Digital Public Library of America**: an image hosting subscription service through the SSU University Library and Art Department which provides the option to share images publicly with the artist's permission.

We encourage you to participate in this service by agreeing to **one** of the following two Creative Commons levels of sharing or the third option of allowing public viewing but not downloading. The Creative Commons website at <http://creativecommons.org/> explains the mission and policies of this public service community that offers an alternative/augmentation to traditional copyright. Both Creative Commons options require that anyone who downloads your material acknowledge you as the creator and the CC provides coding to embed that information in your images. The first option allows altering, redistributing, and copyrighting their reuse by anyone for non-commercial purposes only; the second, more restrictive option allows downloading and sharing, but prohibits alteration or reuse.

**If you agree to release images of your work according to one of these terms, please sign, date, and scan the form below in color and email as a PDF attachment to [Karen.Kessel@sonoma.edu](mailto:Karen.Kessel@sonoma.edu)**

If you are not able to scan the letter, please print out, sign and date the form, make a copy for your records, and return to:

Karen Kessel, Visual Resources Specialist  
Art and Art History Department  
Sonoma State University  
1801 East Cotati Avenue  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

Sincerely,

Karen Kessel

**Agreement Form:**

Artist  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE SELECT ONE (1) OF THE FOLLOWING CHOICES**

I agree to the following licensing option for displaying digital versions of original slides of my work taken by employees of Sonoma State University:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Anyone may download, alter and/or repurpose with identical terms, for non-commercial use only, Creative Commons CC BY NC SA
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Anyone may download, and share but not alter; for non-commercial use only, Creative Commons CC BY NC ND
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Anyone may view, but may not download
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Do not share images of my work on a public website

This agreement shall remain in effect for as long as copyright protection subsists in the works or until you notify us to change your option.

Both parties will agree and acknowledge that neither party will receive payment in exchange for permission to display the creator's work. The Sonoma State University Art and Art History Department will not be responsible for any disputes arising from the application of the Creative Commons license.

Artist's  
signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sonoma State University representative:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Karen Kessel, Visual Resources Specialist  
Art and Art History Department  
Sonoma State University  
Image Collection  
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